NEW

AZTECS

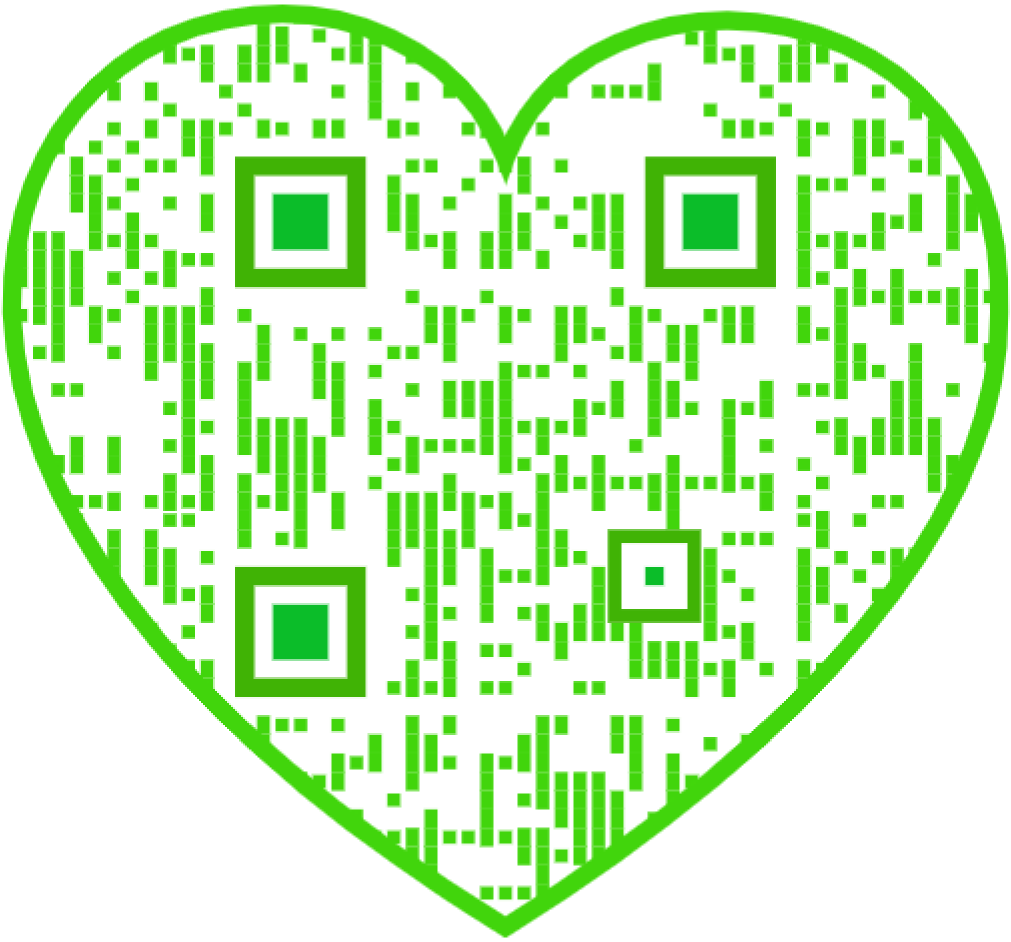
DELVE INTO THE DEPTHS OF A MYSTERIOUS CIVILISATION

WHAT IF THE AZTEC EMPIRE HAD NEVER FALLEN?

Digital Edition

SEVENTH EDITION

ART ◆ RELIGION ◆ WARRIORS ◆ FOOD & DRINK ◆ LEGACY



Welcome to

AZTECS

In 1521, an empire came tumbling down. The Aztecs had ruled in Mesoamerica for 200 years but the Spanish, led by the fearsome Hernán Cortés, were closing in, eager to claim this part of the New World for themselves. It was the end of a rich culture and an entire civilisation - but even so, the Aztec legacy lives on today.

In All About History Book of the Aztecs, uncover the gruesome truth behind human sacrifice and learn what everyday life was really like. Walk the streets of Tenochtitlán, meet the extensive pantheon and cook up some authentic recipes as you explore the world of the Aztecs.

FUTURE

AZTECS

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Cover images
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Photography
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Printed in the UK

Distributed by Marketforce – www.marketforce.co.uk
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All Sbout History Aztecs Seventh Edition (AHB6502)
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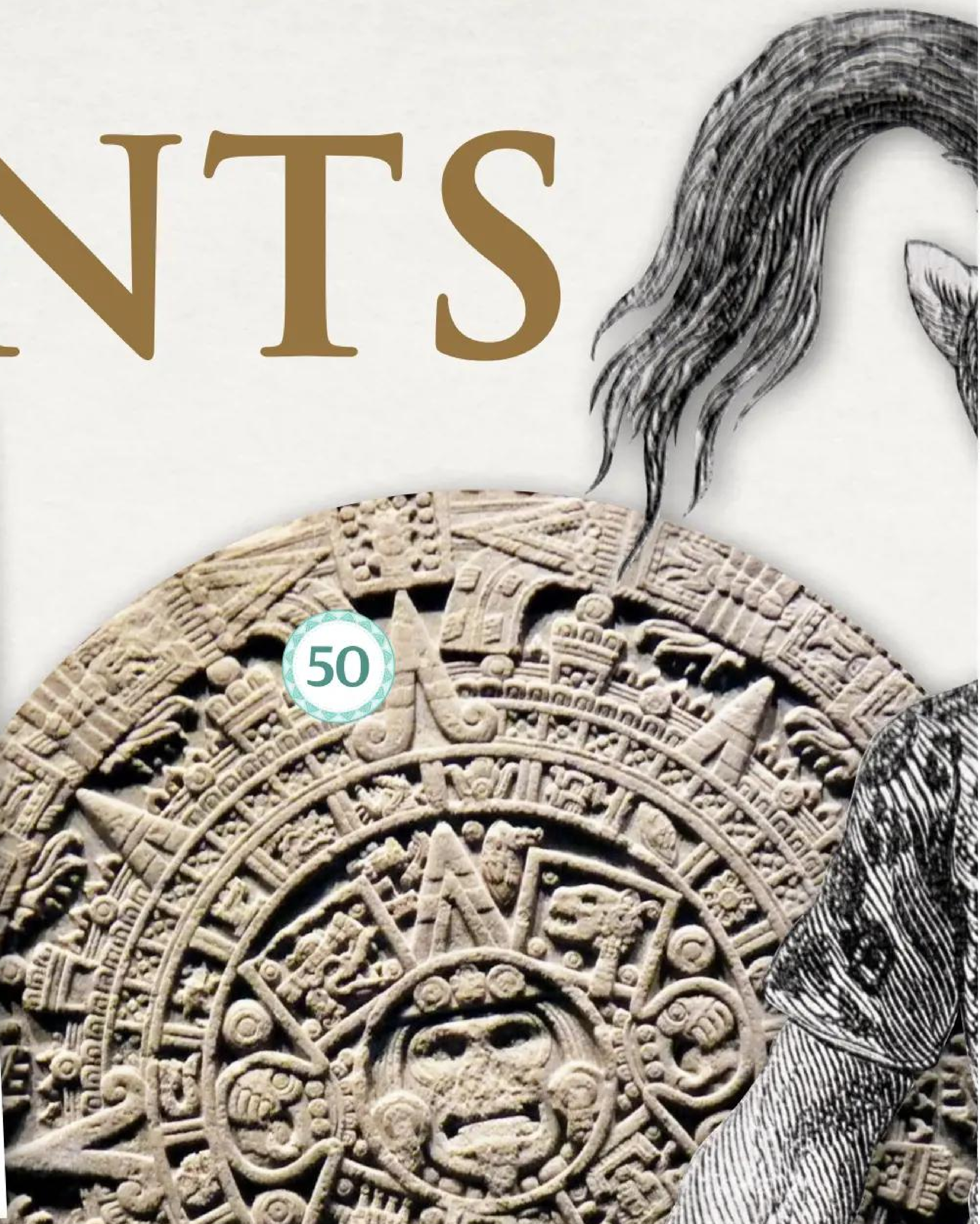

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Secrets of the Aztecs

A civilisation now lost in time, the ancient Aztecs were masters of science and technology, creating medicines, machines and mega-structures unsurpassed on Earth

Written by Robert Jones

Despite being isolated within the deep, dark, unforgiving jungles of Central America, for over 300 years the ancient Aztecs defied their reputation as blood-obsessed barbarians by pioneering many of the scientific and technological advances we take for granted today. What's more, they did so across a broad range of fields, from astronomy to medicine, hoarding their acquired knowledge within huge libraries of codices that contained the secrets to the vast and impressive society they had built.

Unfortunately, much of this knowledge was lost forever when the Spanish conquistadors of Hernán Cortés brought the civilisation to their knees in the early-16th century, with these supposedly heretical texts burned en masse. Luckily, a few records of Aztec scientific knowledge survived and today historians are working tirelessly to unlock their secrets. Read on to discover some of their most impressive scientific knowledge.

Buried deep within the Codex Vergara (a cadastral manuscript) lies a wealth of information about Aztec mathematics, which has now been decoded and revealed to be a vigesimal system, rather than our decimal system in use today. The Aztec vigesimal system uses 20 as its base (rather than 10, as in a decimal system), with written dots equating to one, hyphen-style bars equating to five and various other symbols accounting for 20 and multiples thereof. According to the Vergara, as well as other codices, this system was employed for tax purposes, which was largely based on land owned, as well as for commerce, with quantities of produce traded with precision thanks to the creation of hard and fast rules for addition, subtraction, division and multiplication. Of all the pre-Columbian peoples of Central America, the Aztecs were arguably the most accomplished mathematicians, using a unique numbering system for arithmetic, record keeping and even in a taxation system for Tenochtitlán and the surviving lands.

Land was also measured mathematically, with a selection of algorithms utilised to calculate area, the most basic being the multiplication of length by width, while multiplying the averages of two opposite sides by an adjacent side used for irregular shapes. Land was measured in terms of 'land rods', which was the standard Aztec unit of linear measurement, measuring in at 2.5 metres (8 feet) in length. For measurements under a land rod, a variety of other symbols including arrows, hearts and hands were used for indication. This level of mathematical precision also stretched into other areas, such as construction, which was one area where the Aztecs were most advanced in terms of technological prowess. Evidence that the Aztecs were great builders is plentiful in modern Mexico.

THE AZTECS

Mexico, 14-16th century

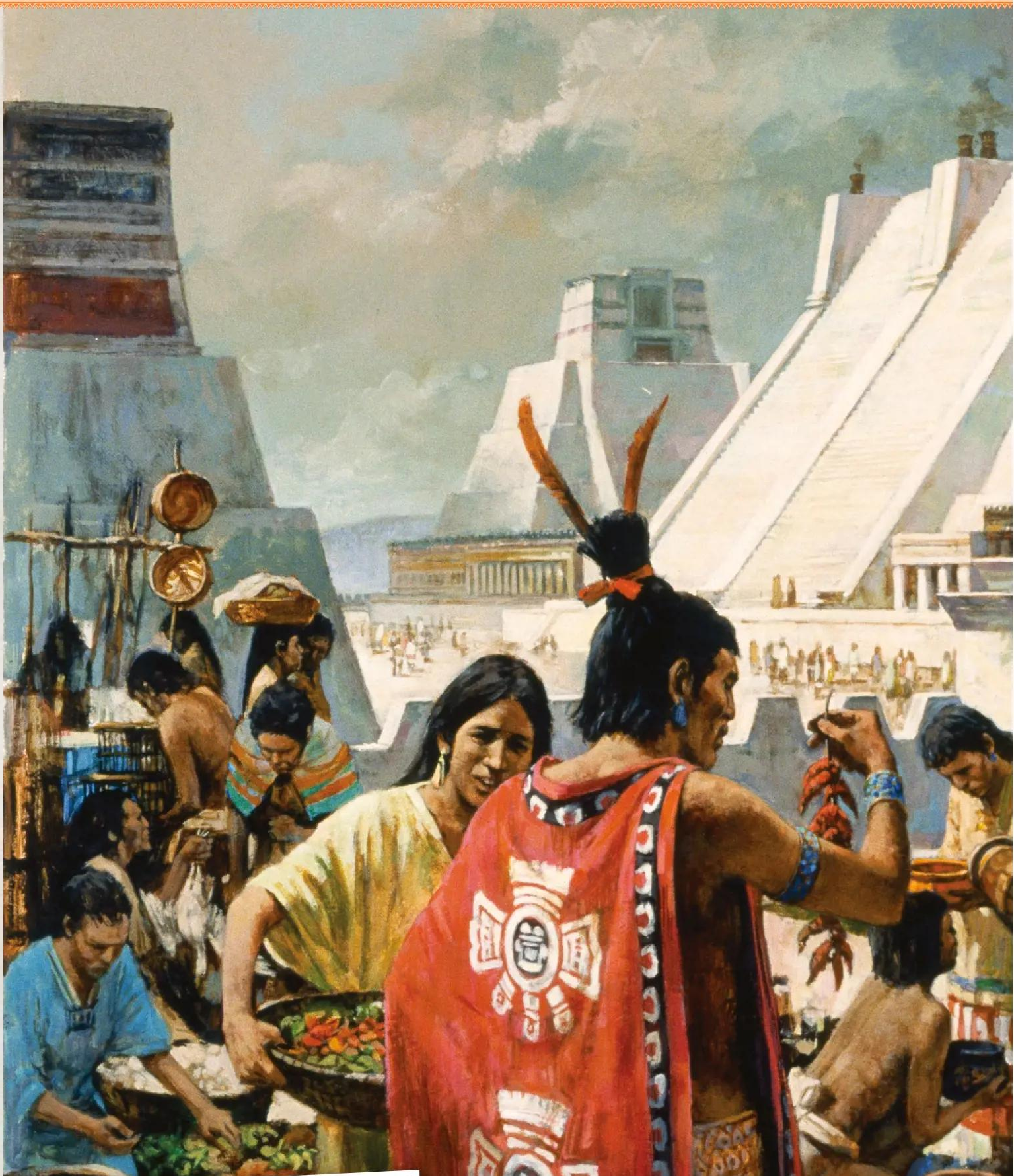
Brief Bio

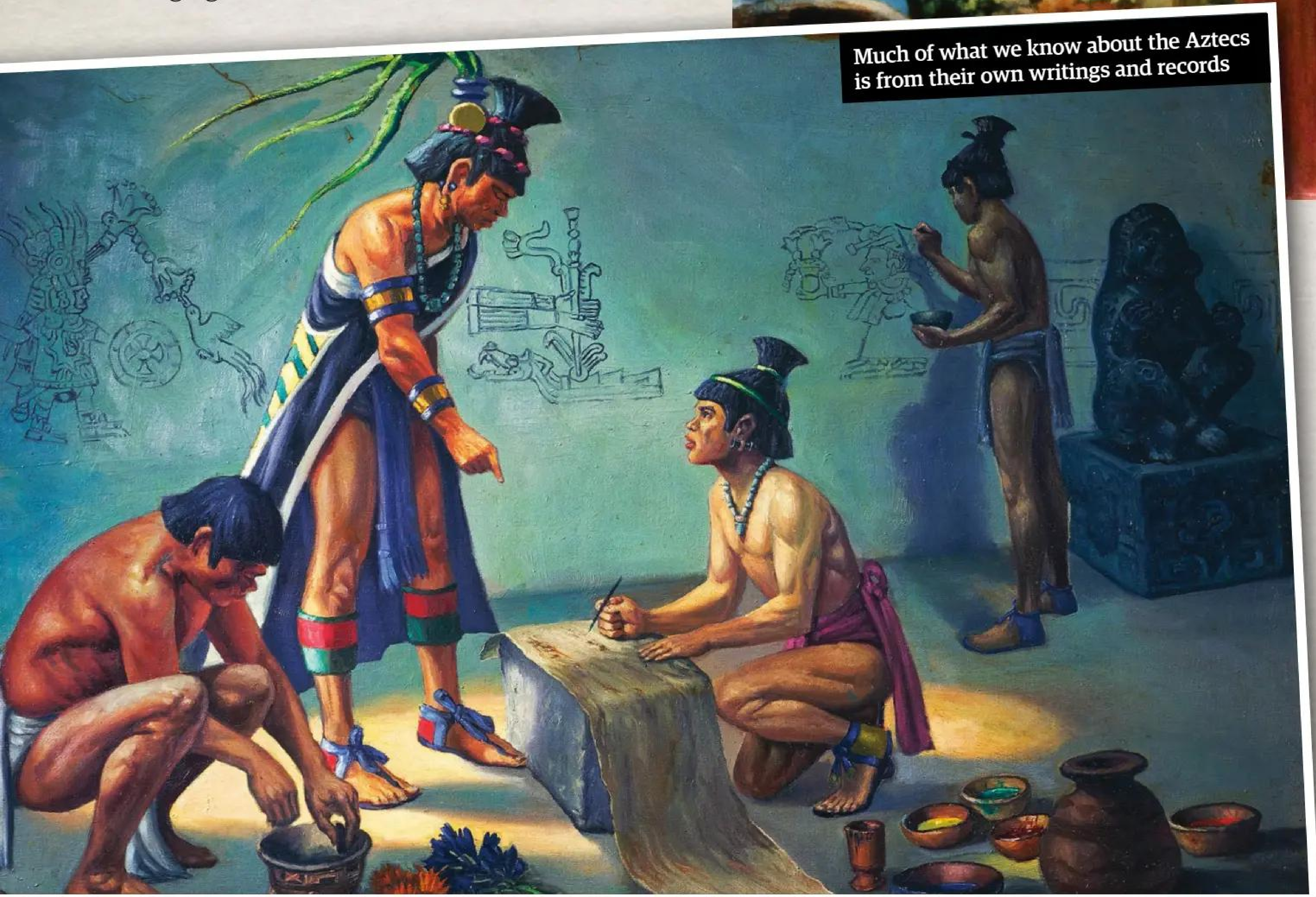
The Aztecs were a Nahaltl-speaking people of Mesoamerica who grew to dominate the entirety of Mexico during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. While their origin is unsure, recent evidence suggests the culture grew out of a tribe of hunter-gatherers occupying the northern Mexican plateau prior to the 12th century. Their capital city, Tenochtitlán, was founded on Lake Texcoco and it remained the heart of their empire until the Spanish invasion of Hernán Cortés led to its collapse in 1520.

As can be seen in the 'El Templo Mayor' boxout, the Aztecs became specialists at building stepped pyramid temples and public buildings, cutting, carving and hauling vast stone blocks and arranging them with exact geometrical precision. They were also excellent house builders, with even the poorest commoner typically living under human-made shelters, with the average dwelling measuring in at approximately 20 square metres (215 square foot) in the capital city of Tenochtitlán. Due to their environment, Aztec houses tended to be built on elevated platforms crafted from wattle-and-daub, with codices indicating that they stood approximately 40 centimetres (15 inches) off the surface. This was particularly important in the swampy city of Tenochtitlán. Walls were constructed from wooden frames and then filled in with stone, sand, lime and clay with adobe bricks - sculpted from a mixture of water, sand and clay - very common.

Roofs ranged in both design and construction materials, with both flat-pole and peaked roofs widespread and everything from straw through to wood and bricks used. Judging from excavated evidence as well as the information deciphered from surviving codices, a selection of construction tools were utilised in each build, ranging from cutting tools such as knives and axes through to trowels and picks, with additional carvings undertaken if the house's patron was particularly wealthy. Important nobles would often have their dwellings painted, with the Aztecs only using natural plant and animal ingredients - such as beetles, for instance the cochineal species containing red carminic acid - to create coloured dyes and paints. Buildings were arranged within a city in terms of importance, which relied largely upon the Aztecs' mastery of astronomy.

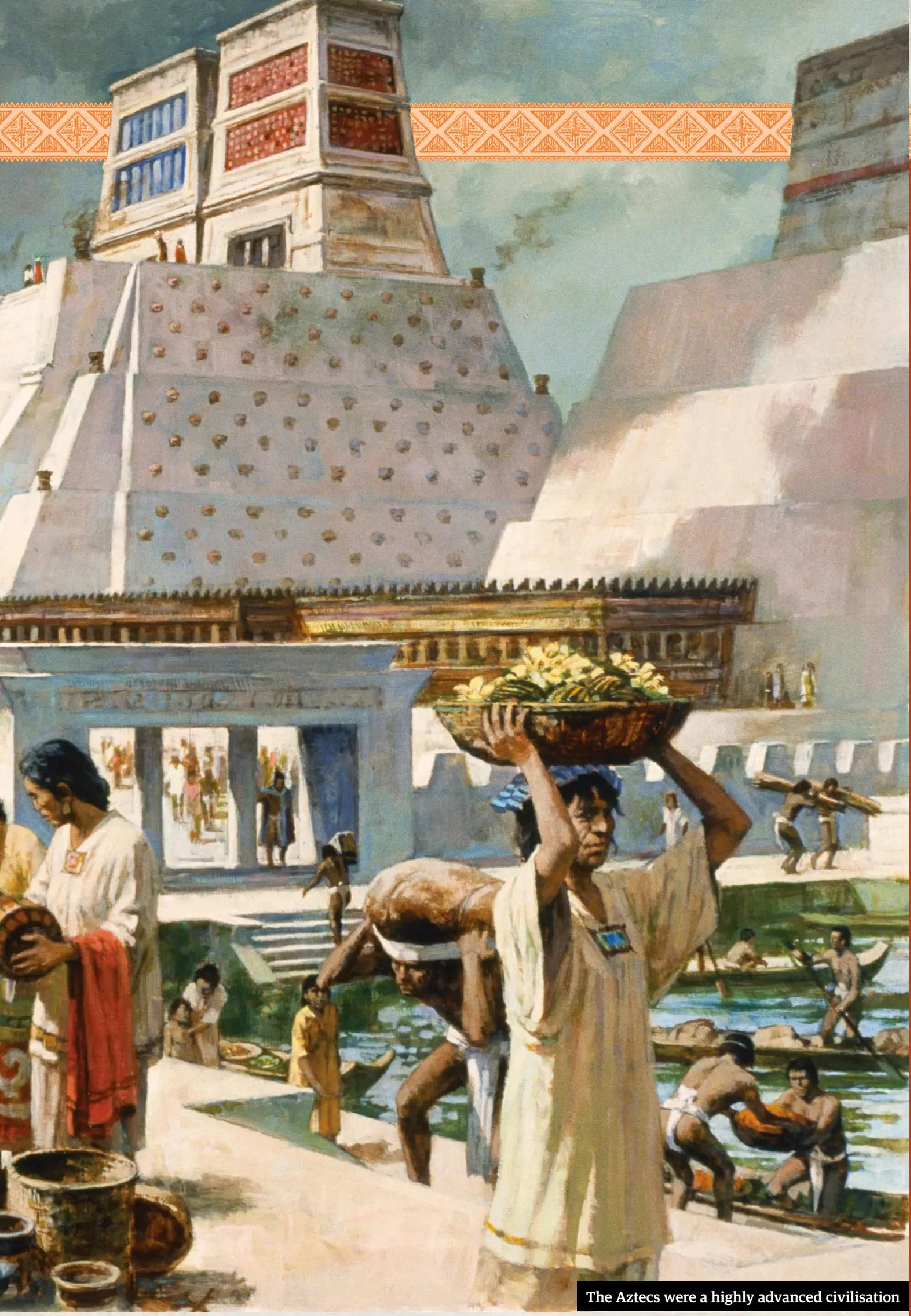
As revealed in the Codex Mendoza, Aztec priests and nobles were accomplished astronomers, accruing and storing the knowledge of deciphering the night sky for centuries and handing it down through generations in isolation from the wider





Much of what we know about the Aztecs is from their own writings and records

> "By harnessing the secret knowledge of the celestial cycles, the Aztecs could use astromony to track the length of a solar year"



The Aztecs were a highly advanced civilisation

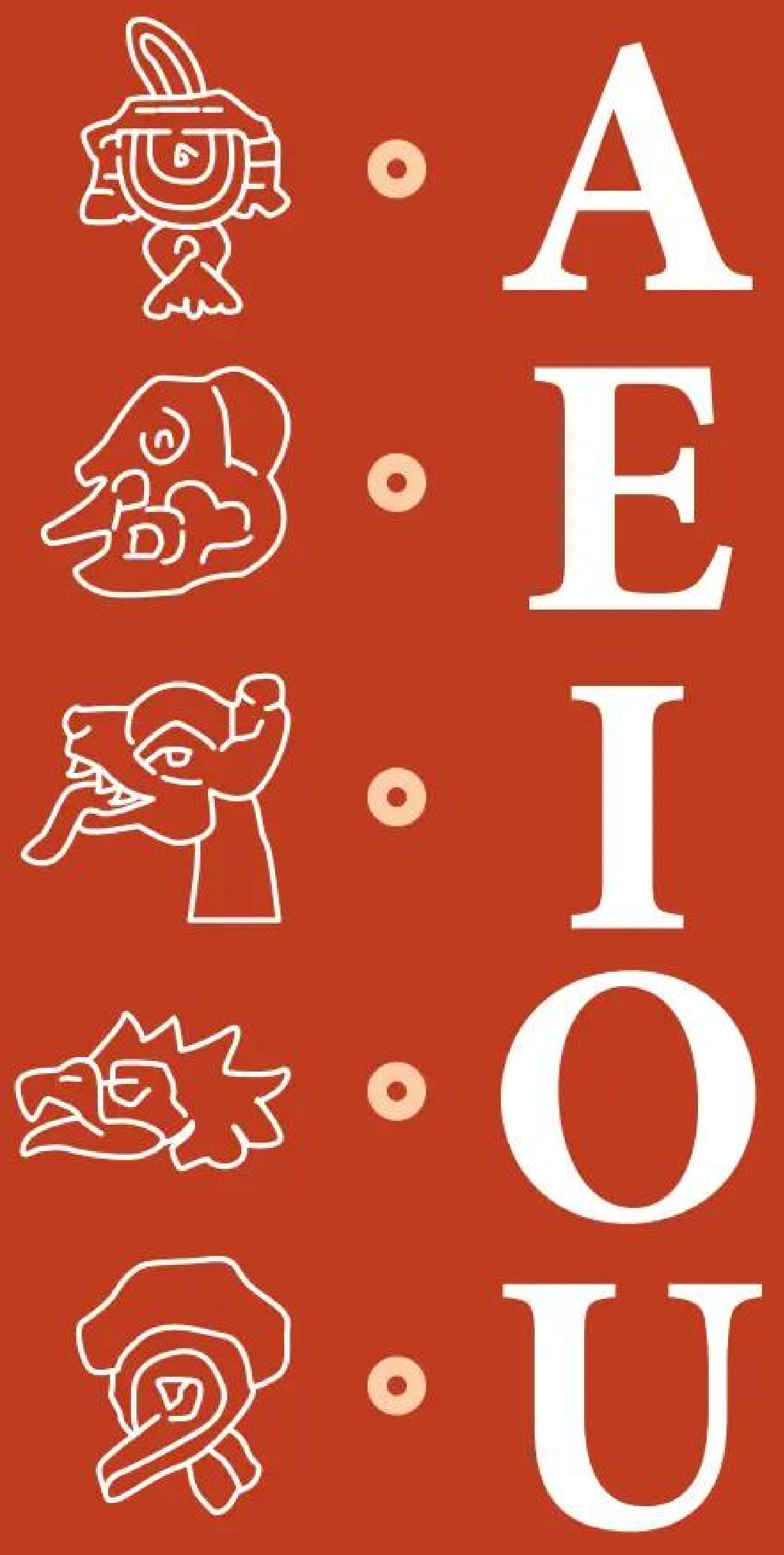
world. Records show that as well as being capable of accurately tracking the movements of celestial bodies such as the Sun, Moon and other planets – which they accomplished by placing sets of crossed wooden poles along their site lines – they utilised that information to create a religious and solar calendar as well as orientate their key structures along equinoctial lines. For example, the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán was aligned so that on the spring equinox (21 March) the Sun rose directly between its two top-mounted shrines, with ceremonies held there in dedication of it.

From their ability to navigate by the position of the stars, through to their creation of solar calendar and onto their construction of temples in perfect alignment so that the Sun's rays shone focussed on their summit during the equinox, the Aztecs were truly expert astronomers. Astronomy was practised primarily by Aztec nobility and priests, with the latter using dedicated observatories within temples to track the movements of celestial bodies.

By harnessing the knowledge of the celestial cycles, the Aztecs could also use astronomy to track the length of a solar year and lunar month, as well as determine the duration of Venus's orbit and the prediction of any solar or lunar eclipses. According to depictions in Aztec codices, they also became extremely skilled at timing the appearances of

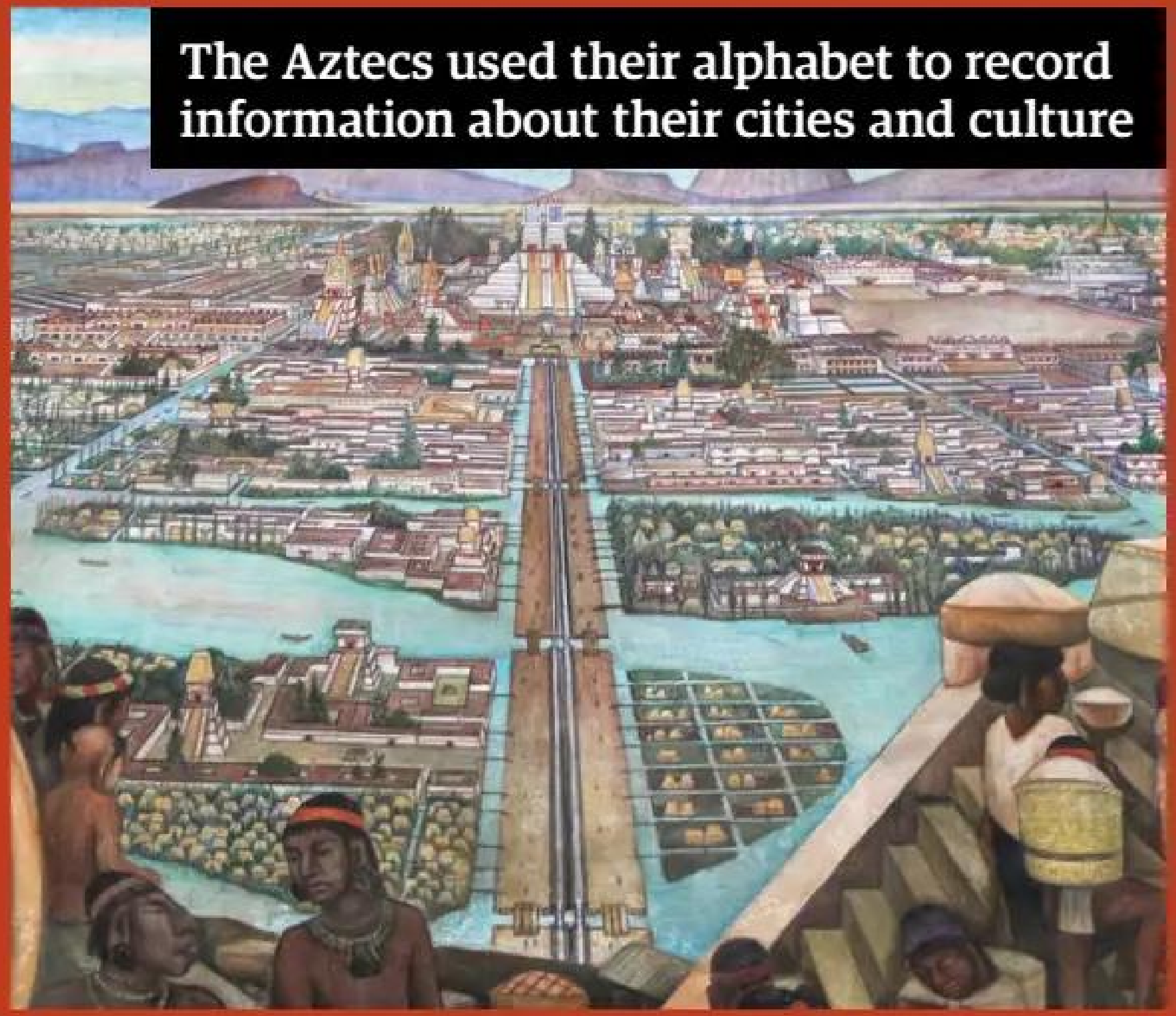
The Aztec alphabet

How did this ancient civilisation advance the written word?



If you needed any further evidence of the advanced state of Aztec learning, then analysis of the society's alphabet seals the deal. The Aztec alphabet was split into three different sections, utilising pictograms, ideograms and phonograms. Pictograms were symbols representing exactly what they were, so a snake pictogram would mean 'snake' and be pronounced 'snake.' On the other hand, phonograms were pictures representing sounds, a lot like the vast majority of alphabets today, with letters representing specific sounds that words can be constructed from.

The Aztec alphabet contained four basic vowels and a large selection of consonants including cu, hu and ch. Finally, ideograms were the most abstract part of the alphabet, consisting of symbols that represented an entire idea. For example, a footprint symbol in the Aztec alphabet represented a journey or passage of time, so would frequently be used to depict the movements of famous people in stories.



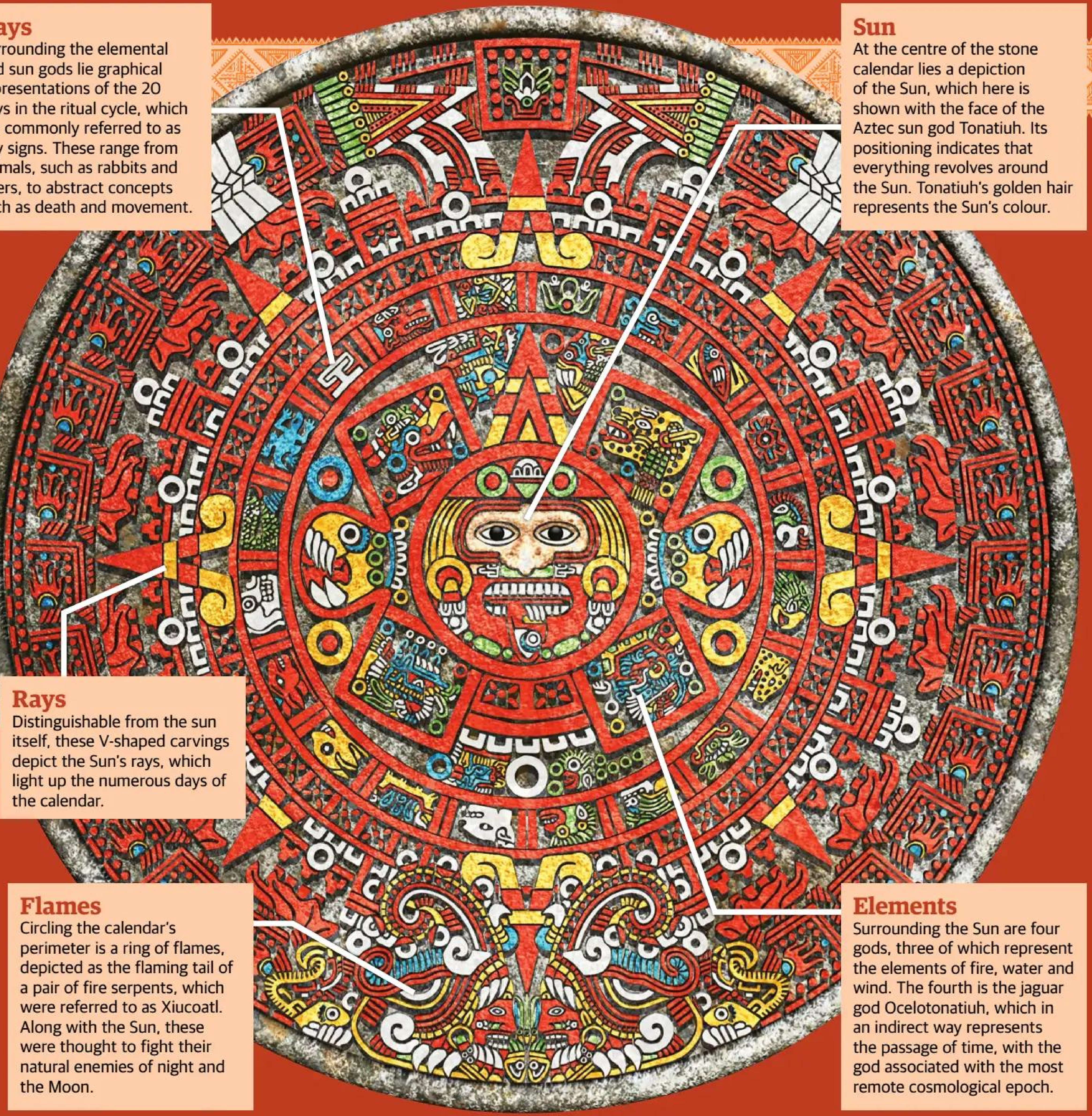
The Aztecs used their alphabet to record information about their cities and culture

The Aztec calendar

Understand this unique time-keeping system now

The Aztec calendar consisted of a 365-day cycle, referred to as a 'year count', and a 260-day cycle, referred to as a 'day count'. Together, these two cycles formed a 52-year century or 'calendar round' for the civilisation, with the former based on the movements of the sun and the latter based on religious belief. The year-count cycle consisted of eighteen 20-day months, with a separate five-day period at the end that was considered unlucky. The day-count cycle consisted of twenty 13-day periods referred to as trecena, with each trecena attributed to a different god.

While it is obvious that many parts of the their calendar system were inaccurate, the fact that the Aztecs could harness their advancements in astronomy and mathematics to create a calendar that was so close to an Earth year while deep in the isolated jungles of central America, is a remarkable feat. Furthermore, despite the Aztecs' religious calendar being centred on mythological deities, many of its aspects are based on scientific study of the Earth's environment and atmosphere. A good representation of the Aztec religious calendar – the cycle referred to as the day count – can be seen in the Aztec calendar stone, a massive 3.7m (12ft) in diameter, 24-ton ornate sun stone that once held great importance in the ancient civilisation of the Aztecs. The stone, which demonstrates the Aztecs' advanced understanding of geometry, is broken down into constituent parts in the diagram to the right.



Days
Surrounding the elemental and sun gods lie graphical representations of the 20 days in the ritual cycle, which are commonly referred to as day signs. These range from animals, such as rabbits and deers, to abstract concepts such as death and movement.

Sun
At the centre of the stone calendar lies a depiction of the Sun, which here is shown with the face of the Aztec sun god Tonatiuh. Its positioning indicates that everything revolves around the Sun. Tonatiuh's golden hair represents the Sun's colour.

Rays
Distinguishable from the sun itself, these V-shaped carvings depict the Sun's rays, which light up the numerous days of the calendar.

Flames
Circling the calendar's perimeter is a ring of flames, depicted as the flaming tail of a pair of fire serpents, which were referred to as Xiucoatl. Along with the Sun, these were thought to fight their natural enemies of night and the Moon.

Elements
Surrounding the Sun are four gods, three of which represent the elements of fire, water and wind. The fourth is the jaguar god Ocelotonatiuh, which in an indirect way represents the passage of time, with the god associated with the most remote cosmological epoch.

comets and asteroids and often marked such occasions with ritualistic events.

Of course, the most practical everyday application of Aztec astronomy was in their construction of a calendar, which included both a 365-day annual solar calendar as well as 260-day divination calendar (for a detailed explanation, see 'The Aztec Calendar' boxout above). The former calendar was physically manifested in Tenochtitlán as the Calendar Stone, displayed so that everybody could keep track of the passing of time.

One area where the Aztecs utilised their scientific and technological ingenuity to maximum effect was in their farming practices. Living in and around large swamps and lake-heavy areas of Central America, the Aztecs designed and employed terracing and artificial island systems to ensure crops had optimal land area to grow. They built aqueducts and dug channels to ensure crops were irrigated, and crafted their own tools and basic farming machines for crop planting and harvesting. The most common crop grown by the Aztecs was maize (corn), but due to their mastery of the art many other crops such as squashes, beans, avocados and guavas were delivered.

With their largest city-state of Tenochtitlán built in the middle of Lake Texcoco and housing north of 200,000 people, a large and consistent food supply was necessary for the Aztecs. Their mastery of irrigation and the chinampas construction system meant that vast fields of produce were grown all-year-round, with maize, beans, squash and much more grown with a frequency unsurpassed on the continent.

The Aztecs also harnessed knowledge of nutrition, specifically in terms of the health of soils and water when used to grow crops. Indeed, the Aztecs operated one of the most advanced crop-rotation systems ever created: their knowledge that certain crops deplete the land of specific nutrients was used to ensure soils were always cycled for a new type of produce, granting it time to recover. Further, specific crops were partnered with ones ensuring a nutritional balance within the planting area, with the combination ensuring that farms maximised crop yield for every square metre of land used. The Aztecs also grew many herbs within their systems, with these used in another specialist Aztec science; herbology.

Aztecs' understanding of medicinal science was incredibly advanced for the time. In a period where most western nations were still addressing illnesses with either prayer or misguided placebos, Aztec civilisation granted prestige to the position of doctor and encouraged them to study the human body and potential remedies in depth. Among these studies, those of plants and their medicinal effects were central, from which Aztec doctors fashioned antispasmodic medications capable of preventing muscle spasms during surgery, according to codices such as the Codex Barberini, commonly referred to as the 'Aztec Herbal.' This was primarily achieved through the use of the passion flower. Other inventions included organic paste painkillers, liquid rubber for curing earaches and ground obsidian for the sealing of wounds.

Aztec physicians became the most skilled herbalists in the world, thanks to their in-depth study of the human body and their environment. Indeed, along with the establishment of hospitals, Aztec doctors were encouraged to undertake research, studying the effects of plants grown in large communal gardens. On top of this scientific approach, Aztec doctors accrued significant general medical knowledge that today we take for granted, including that people should not look at eclipses to prevent against vision damage, steam baths could cleanse the skin and sinuses and that specific foods were better for the human body than others.

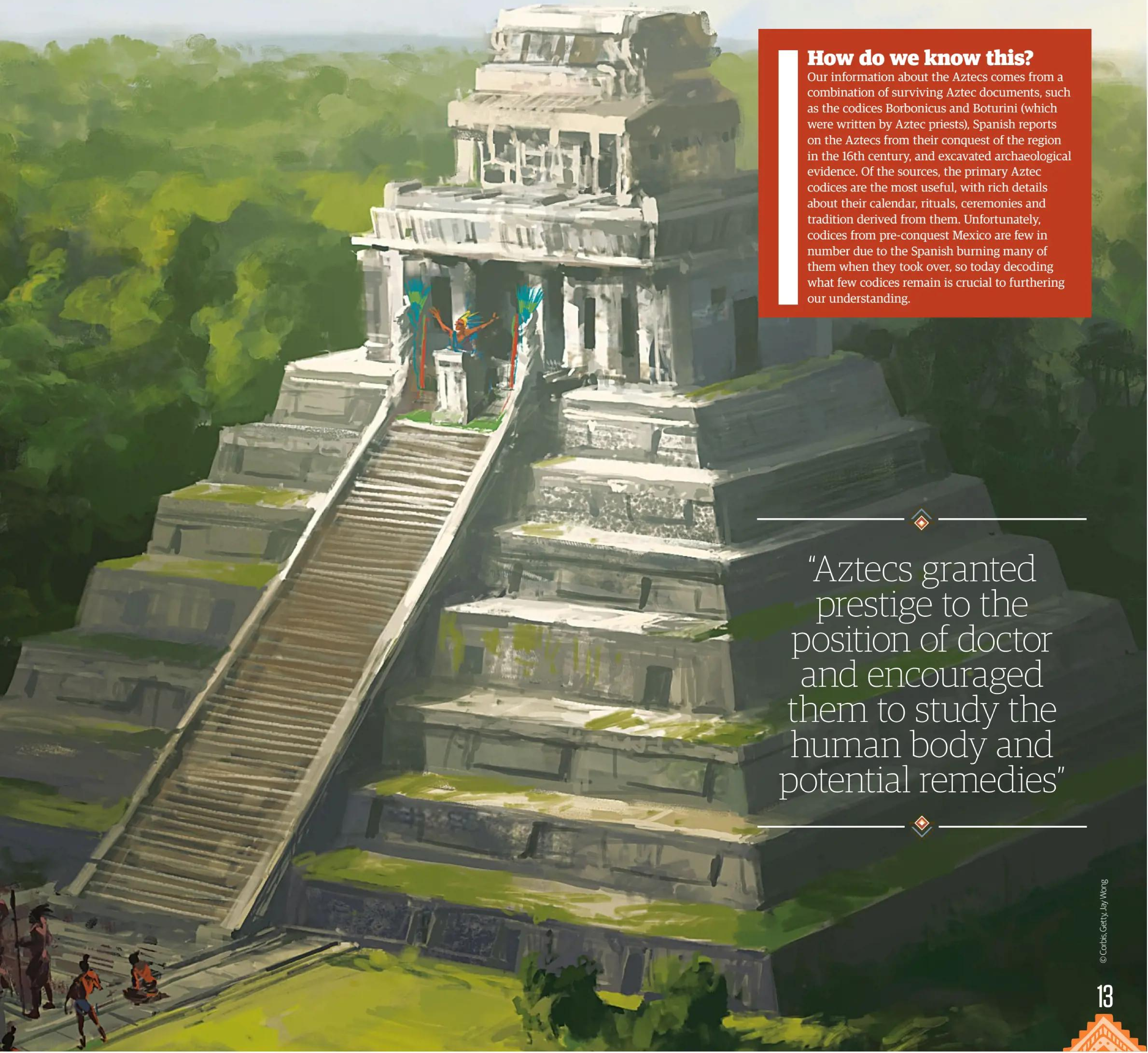
These vast banks of knowledge allowed the Aztecs to scientifically and technologically surpass many of Earth's other ancient cultures, and in a fraction of the time, with the Mesoamerican peoples taking mere centuries to build a society the others – such as Ancient Egypt's – took thousands of years to build. The secrets of science that they uncovered have withstood the test of time, with salvaged knowledge from the ancient culture leading to further developments in their field and contributing greatly to the sciences as they exist today.

El Templo Mayor

How did the Aztecs build this most awesome of citadels?

Originally constructed in 1325 and then added to and extended six times afterwards, the massive Templo Mayor citadel of Tenochtitlán was surely one of the wonders of the ancient world, towering over the Aztec city state's other structures at close to 30 m (90 ft) in height. Indeed, by the time it was eventually sacked and destroyed by the Spanish conquistadors of the 16th century, the pyramid temple consisted of four steep sloped terraces topped with a great platform measuring 80 x 100 m (262 x 328 ft), with a further two sets of stone stairs leading to a pair of grand shrines. Every part of the temple was decorated with carvings and surrounding it lay a vast stone-slabbed precinct that measured 4,000 m^2 (43,000 ft^2) filled with balustrades and further decorative aspects. Not bad considering it was constructed by slaves and working-class craftsmen under the direction of a ruling class of learned architects and mathematicians.

Indeed, El Templo Mayor was arguably the culmination of the advanced construction techniques mastered by the Aztecs over their civilisation's tenure in Central America. From the sculpting of vast blocks of stone from dedicated quarries for its terraces – the Aztecs were the first culture to industrialise this process in Central and South America – to utilising scaffolds and rope lifts to transport men and tools up its structure and onto the expert craftsmanship that allowed them to carve vast ornamental dragons and mix polychrome paints to decorate the temple's exterior, El Templo Mayor became the temple of temples. Indeed, if it were not for the sudden obliteration of their society by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, who knows how much higher and more complicated their temples could have grown?



How do we know this?

Our information about the Aztecs comes from a combination of surviving Aztec documents, such as the codices Borbonicus and Boturini (which were written by Aztec priests), Spanish reports on the Aztecs from their conquest of the region in the 16th century, and excavated archaeological evidence. Of the sources, the primary Aztec codices are the most useful, with rich details about their calendar, rituals, ceremonies and tradition derived from them. Unfortunately, codices from pre-conquest Mexico are few in number due to the Spanish burning many of them when they took over, so today decoding what few codices remain is crucial to furthering our understanding.

> "Aztecs granted prestige to the position of doctor and encouraged them to study the human body and potential remedies"

© Corbis, Getty, Jay Wong

acacitli
quapan
ocelopa
aguexotl
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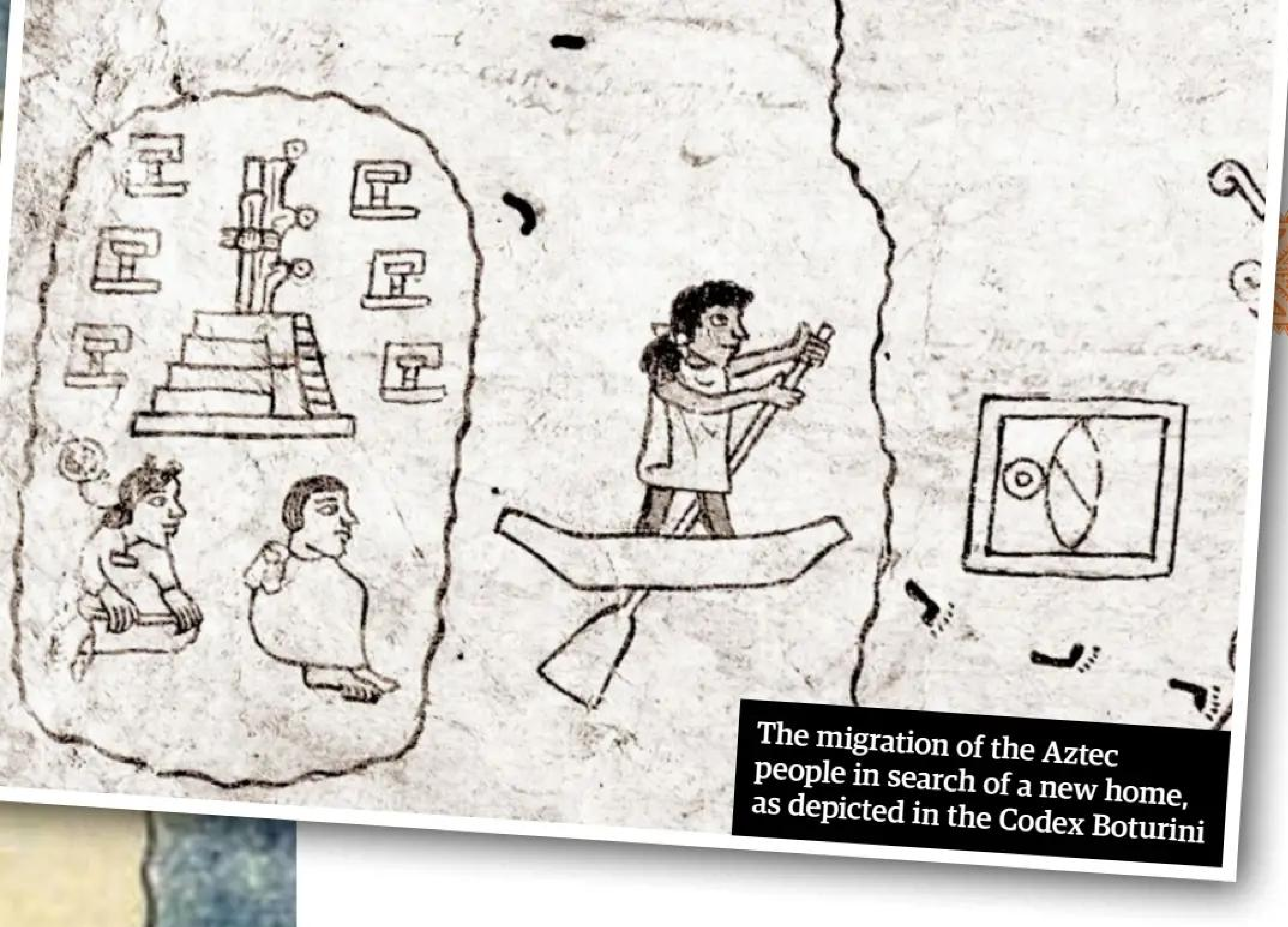
The founding of Tenochtitlán as illustrated in the Codex Mendoza



The migration of the Aztec people in search of a new home, as depicted in the Codex Boturini

Origins of the Aztecs

How one of the most sophisticated but brutal civilizations in Mesoamerica rose to dominance around the shores of Lake Texcoco

Written by Harry Cunningham

According to legend, the Aztecs arrived in present-day Mexico from their ancestral, mythical homeland of Aztlán around 1000 CE. They first lived in Chicomoztoc (the mysterious 'place of seven caves') and then founded Aztlán, which was an area surrounded by water. Indeed, the word Aztec is said to mean 'people from Aztlán', although this was not a word that the citizen of Tenochtitlán (the city founded on the shores of Lake Texcoco) used to refer to themselves. Whether Aztlán ever existed or is just a mythical place is also a point of considerable historical debate, to which there is no clear answer. If it were a real place, some have speculated that it may have been located in what is now northern Mexico – or perhaps even in the southern United States – and its people were forced to migrate south due to drought.

It is thought the Aztecs attempted to settle in a number of lands but were repeatedly forced to move on when the locals discovered their ferocious appetite for human sacrifice. The Aztecs lived like nomads in this period, settling wherever the winds of change took them. They travelled in small groups called calpulli which were like tribes: a group of families descended from the same ancestors. For a while, they may have acted as mercenaries for the people of Culhuacan, another city in the valley of Mexico. But they were soon cast out by the Culhuacan after they sacrificed one of their leaders' daughters.

The Aztecs also built another city near the sacred Coatepec hill (the 'hill of the serpent') where they experimented with dams and water management that would come to define their success on Lake Texcoco. This city was built to align with the four cardinal directions: north,

The Crab Nebula is the remnant of the 1054 supernova that the early Aztecs may have witnessed

Cosmic clues

How the night sky could help reveal the Aztecs' motivation for migration

As in many other cultures, the Aztecs often looked to the stars in the night sky to provide guidance or answers for many of life's great questions. One of the spectacular phenomena they may have observed is a supernova. These dramatic cosmic events occur when a massive star reaches the end of its life and explodes, producing an incredibly bright flash of light that can radiate for days, months, or in some cases even years before eventually fading from view. Even though it may have been hundreds or thousands of light years away, a supernova would have been visible from Earth in the night sky, and sometimes during the day too.

This was the case with a supernova that occured in 1054 CE around 6,500 light years away. This event would have looked like an incredibly bright new star in the sky, and was documented by Chinese and Arab astronomers at the time. Incidentally the Aztecs began their calendar in 1054 CE, long before they set eyes upon Lake Texcoco. Was this the sign that the god Huitzilopochtli was said to have given them to begin their migration? Even if it was just a coincidence, the event was clearly significant, and perhaps helps us gather clues as to the potential location of Aztlán. It provides a provisional start date from which we can try and work forward, tracing where the migrating Aztecs may have travelled in the intervening three centuries before the establishment of their settlement on Lake Texcoco in 1325 CE.

> "By the time the Spanish arrived in 1519, the Aztecs had constructed one of the largest and most complex cities in the world"

south, east and west, which were believed to represent different deities and elements. Coatepec was also believed to be the birthplace of the sun god Huitzilopochtli, to whom the Aztecs allegedly made human sacrifices – though the extent to which these took place is also a matter of historical debate. Some believe that the Spanish embellished accounts of human sacrifices in order to justify their own brutal behaviour during the conquest, but recent archaeological discoveries suggest the Spanish accounts may have been more accurate than first thought.

One particularly grisly incident highlights this. Within the Aztecs, there were those in the tribes who felt settled and wanted to stay in the city, but the god Huitzilopochtli apparently opposed the idea and made his feelings known. According to Dirk R Van Tuerenhout, author of *The Aztecs: New Perspectives*, the legend tells of an ominous storm. "At midnight, the [Aztecs] heard a great noise and the next day the leaders of the clan of the Huitznahua [those who were in favour of staying], including Coyolxuahqui [their leader], were found dead. All had their chests opened and their hearts removed." We can see here the brutality of the Aztecs, evident in their earliest days.

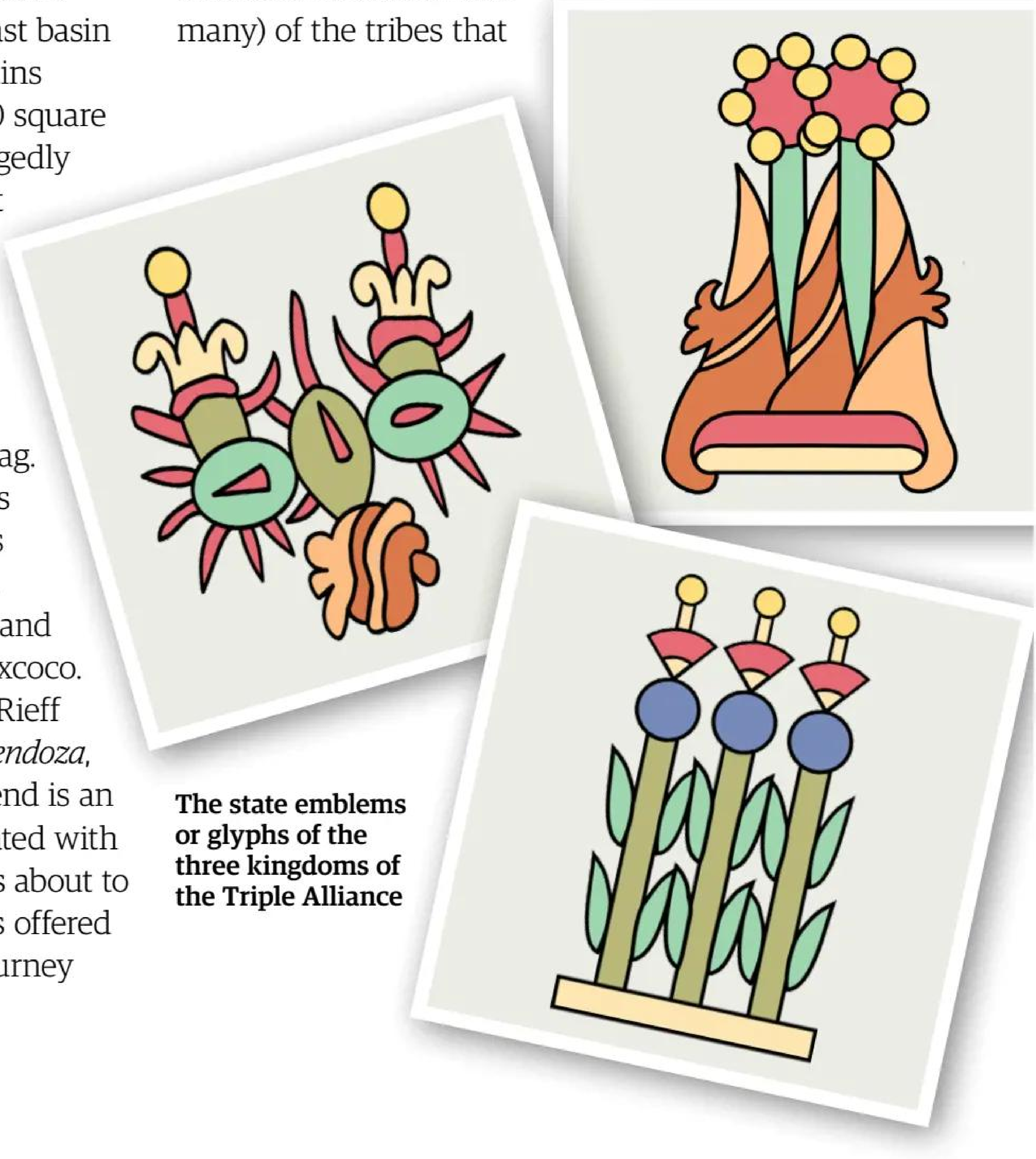
By the 14th century, Huitzilopochtli was said to have guided the Aztecs to their new home at Lake Texcoco and given them three gifts which he thought would help them on their rise to political dominance: an arrow, a bow and a net. Texcoco was one of five lakes sat in the vast basin of Mexico, a valley surrounded by mountains which stretched across and area of 96,000 square meters. When they arrived the Aztecs allegedly saw an eagle eagerly eating a snake, whilst sitting majestically atop a cactus: they took this as a sign that this was the place where they should finally settle. Indeed, this symbol of the city's founding has endured and now forms Mexico's national coat of arms, which adorns the Mexican flag. Huitzilopchtli had allegedly told the Aztecs that such a sign would mark the site of his nephew Copil's heart. According to legend, Huitzilopchtli had, regretfully, killed Copil and thrown his heart in the middle of Lake Texcoco. According to Frances Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, authors of *The Essential Codex Mendoza*, 'The eagle that depicts the foundation legend is an Aztec symbol for the sun, which is associated with Huitzilopchtli… the cactus fruit the eagle is about to consume may represent the human hearts offered to the sun to sustain it during the daily journey across the firmament…"

Initially two small islands, the Aztecs ingeniously created one large artificial island on Lake Texcoco. They brought rocks and dirt across from the mainland and then used mud and reeds to expand the land surface, even planting trees so its roots would help to support their structure. Upon the new island, the Aztecs built a settlement that appeared to rise from the surrounding water; they called their new home Tenochtitlán.

At first the city was a theocracy; the highest religious leaders (priests) were also the rulers of the city. Tenoch, after whom Tenochtitlán is named, is considered the foremost of these as he was one of the first to lead the city following its foundation. It is believed he had an important role during the time when the Aztecs served the Colhuacan. Again, it is difficult to conclude whether Tenoch was a real person who was indeed the ruler, a mythical figure, or perhaps an important person whose role was subsequently embellished by later generations.

The initial buildings in Tenochtitlán were basic mud huts, but over time these were replaced with more complicated structures as the city grew. The architectural centerpiece of the city itself was the Templo Mayor. Originally a mere shrine, it was constantly torn down and replaced with more ornate buildings, soon becoming the focal point of an entire religious district.

The Aztecs considered themselves the spiritual relatives (and indeed it is thought they shared common ancestors with many) of the tribes that

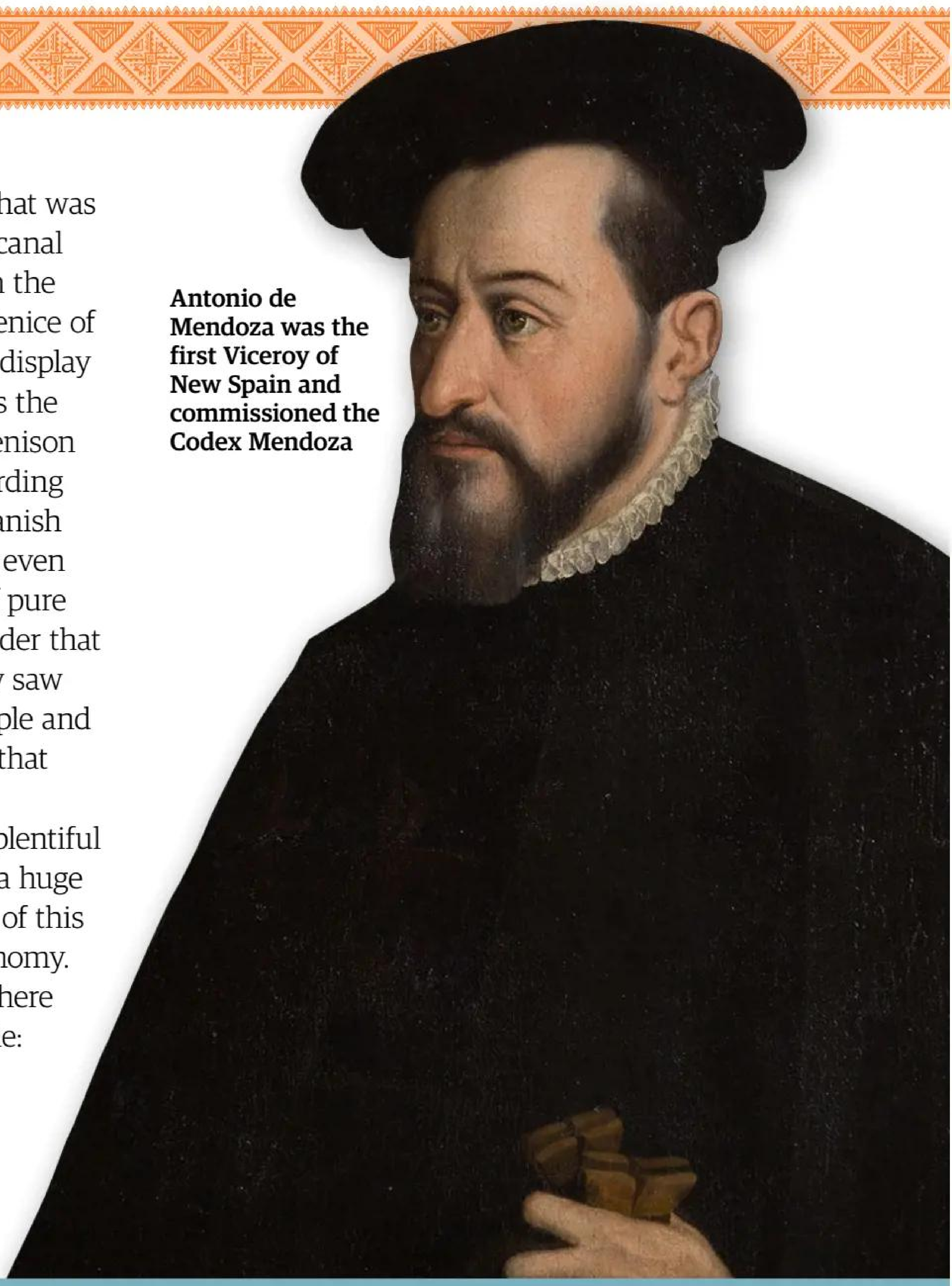

The state emblems or glyphs of the three kingdoms of the Triple Alliance

had already settled in the Basin of Mexico by the 14th century, such as the Toltec peoples. Much of Aztec culture and religion was also very similar, if not the same, to other tribes in the region. It can therefore be difficult to ascertain who was actually an Aztec, and how broadly the term should be applied. Some historians use the term Mexica people instead.

By the time the Spanish conquistadors arrived on 8 November 1519, the Aztecs had constructed one of the largest and most complex cities in the world. Tenochtitlán had roughly 200,000 inhabitants compared to contemporary Seville, which had a population of 60,000, London which had 50,000, and Paris and Constantinople (now Istanbul) which had around 300,000 each. Linked to the main city on the lake - which covered around 12 square kilometres - were bridges, causeways and bustling canals connecting different communities, part of the same overwhelming metropolis that characterises the present-day Mexico City that was later built in the same location. In fact, the canal structure of the city was so advanced when the Spanish arrived they referred to it as the 'Venice of the West'. The amount of wealth on display was also enormous. The meats the king ate included rabbit, venison and wild boar and, according to accounts by the Spanish conquerors, the king even drank from a cup of pure gold. It was no wonder that the Spanish quickly saw both the Aztec people and the city as a threat that needed crushing.

It is clear that the plentiful local resources played a huge part in the development of this prosperous city and its economy. As Van Tuerenhout points out there was an "abundance of resources available: migratory birds and aquatic animals were hunted and collected. These resources, as well as green algae, were taken to the markets of larger communities along the edges of Lake Texcoco and sold as well."

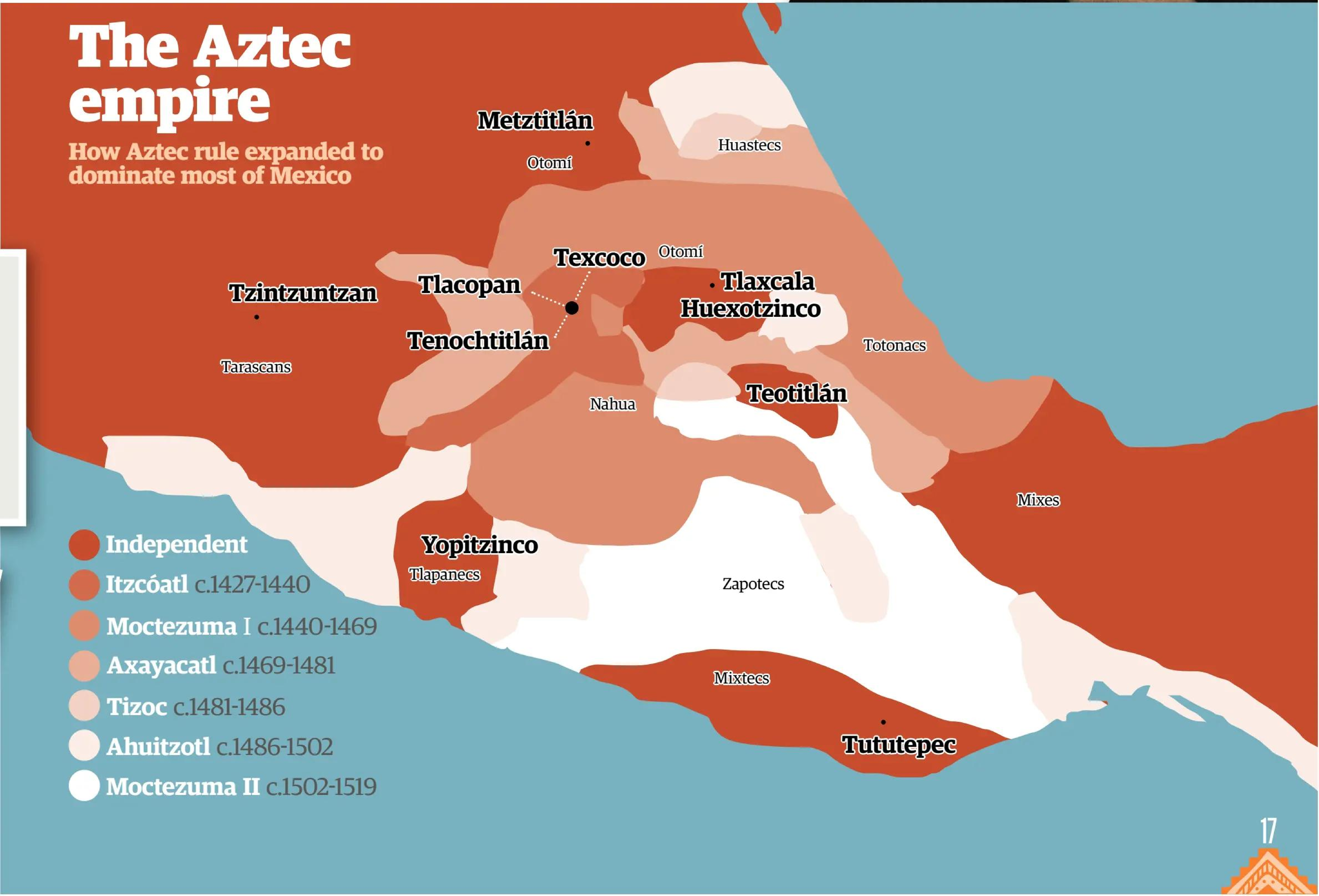
> Those we refer to as Aztecs identified themselves by various names, including Mexica, Acolhua, and Tenochca



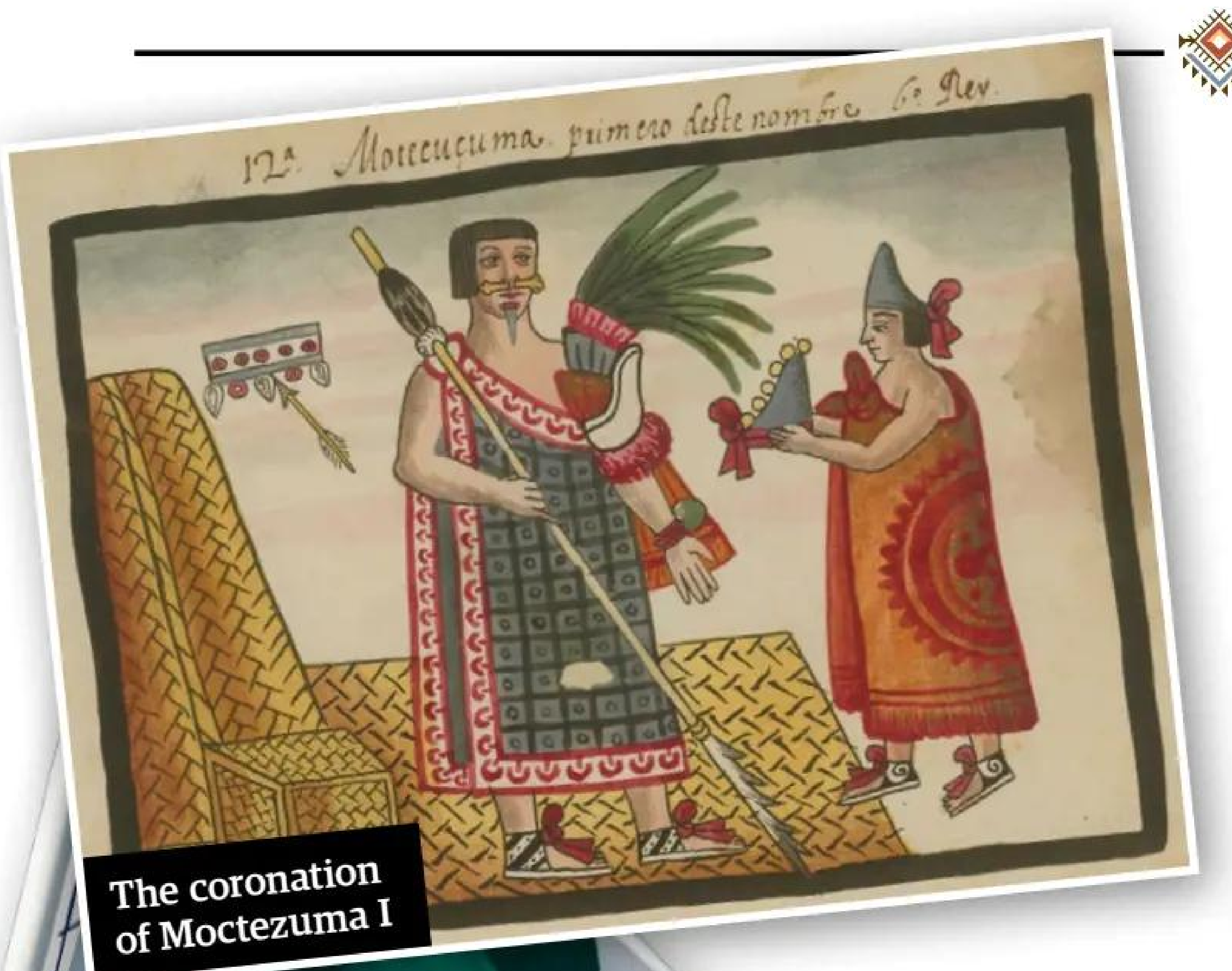
Antonio de Mendoza was the first Viceroy of New Spain and commissioned the Codex Mendoza

The Aztec empire

How Aztec rule expanded to dominate most of Mexico


Metztitlán
Otomí
Huastecs
Texcoco
Otomí
Tlacopan
Tlaxcala
Huexotzinco
Tzintzuntzan
Tenochtitlán
Tarascans
Totonacs
Nahua
Teotitlán
Mixes
Yopitzinco
Tlapanecs
Zapotecs
Mixtecs
Tututepec
● Independent
● Itzcóatl c.1427-1440
● Moctezuma I c.1440-1469
● Axayacatl c.1469-1481
● Tizoc c.1481-1486
● Ahuitzotl c.1486-1502
● Moctezuma II c.1502-1519

> "One aspect that characterises the Aztecs' success was their ability to adapt and respond to crisis"

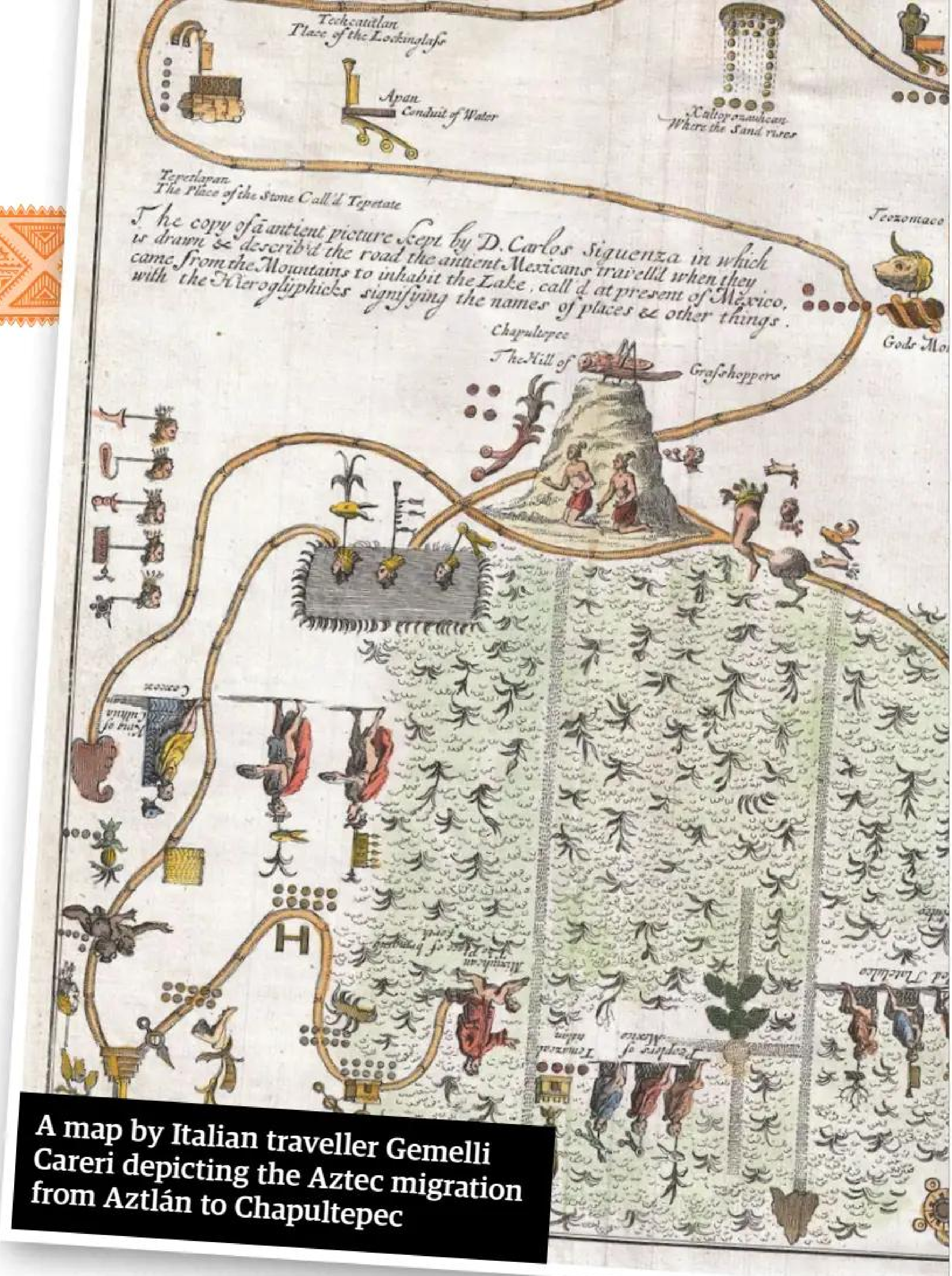

12a. Motecucuma primero deste nombre 6e Rey

The coronation of Moctezuma I

Unfortunately, the Spanish deliberately destroyed many of the documents and drawings that would have helped us understand Tenochtitlán's early history. One of the most important sources that did survive, however, was the Codex Mendoza. Written for and designed to be read by the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, Charles V, it was named after Antonio de Mendoza, the Viceroy to New Spain (Spanish colonies in Central and South America) who commissioned it. However, it never reached its intended destination, as the fleet carrying the valuable cargo from the Americas back to Spain was reportedly pillaged by French privateers. After changing hands several times, the codex was donated to Oxford University's Bodleian Library in 1659, but its true importance was not realised until much later.

The Codex Mendoza includes a selection of pictograms annotated in both Nahuatl and Spanish, providing a great deal of detail about the history of Aztec civilization. It is divided into three parts: a history of the Aztec rulers and the founding of Tenochtitlán, a list of tributes that the empire's 400 towns and 39 provinces paid each year and a miscellaneous collection of drawings which describe day-to-day Aztec life. What the codex and other archaeological sources reveal to us is that the city expanded and evolved as the Aztecs made political alliances, fought wars and brokered trade agreements with the surrounding tribes to slowly dominate the entire area. But this expansion wasn't necessarily always seamless or straightforward.

In a savvy move, the Aztecs agreed to assist a rival city, Azcapotzalco (the capital of the Tepanec people who shared common ancestors with the Aztecs) rather than attacking them outright. With mutual assistance both cities grew in power and wealth and the Aztecs were able to ensure the acceptance and succession of the ruler Acamapichtli, who had close ties to the Tepanec dynasty – the more powerful state at the time. The Tepanec people had their own king but by the early 15th century, a war of succession broke out between the Aztecs and the Tepanec people about who should take over, and before long this spilled over into a full-blown war between the local kingdoms. Those that survived – Tenochtitlán, Tlacopan and Texcoco – forged a Triple Alliance which lasted for nearly 100 years. In reality, however, it became less of an alliance and more a way of integrating the various smaller cities and tribes into an empire that was dominated by Tenochtitlán. Davíd Carrasco, professor of Latin American Studies at Harvard Divinity School, describes it as a 'military confederation' which enabled "hegemonic expansion through conquest and tribute control of communities subjugated by treaty or warfare". Because of this some historians have suggested that it is best to think about Aztecs as a broad term for an over-arching group of people, within which are many different tribes and groups, each with their own set of values and priorities.


Tecpacatitlan Place of the Lookingglasse
Apan Conduit of Water
Tepetlapan The Place of the Stone Call'd Tepetate
The copy of a antient picture kept by D. Carlos Siguenza in which is drawn & describ'd the road the antient Mexicans travell'd when they came from the Mountains to inhabit the Lake, call'd at present of Mexico, with the Hieroglyphicks signifying the names of places & other things.
Chapultepec
The Hill of Grasshoppers

A map by Italian traveller Gemelli Careri depicting the Aztec migration from Aztlán to Chapultepec

Pedro Carrasco, former professor of anthropology and history at the State University of New York described more of a tripartite structure in which, as new towns and cities joined the empire, they were assigned to the hierarchy of one of the three cities, usually their nearest geographical neighbour. He also argued that "the degree of control exercised by the empire varied greatly in the distant religions; the situation of some [towns] is not well known..."

Tenochtitlán was by far the most important city of the three, and had all of the types of buildings we would associate with a contemporary, flourishing European capital: royal palaces, temples and residences. The other cities and provinces also provided Tenochtitlán with resources such as food so there was less need for cultivated land within the city limits. This was also effectively the seat of the government – or the governing class – who

> The Aztecs spoke Nahuatl – versions of these languages are still spoken by the indigenous Nahua people of Mexico

The symbol of an eagle eating a snake remains a prominent emblem in Mexico to this day

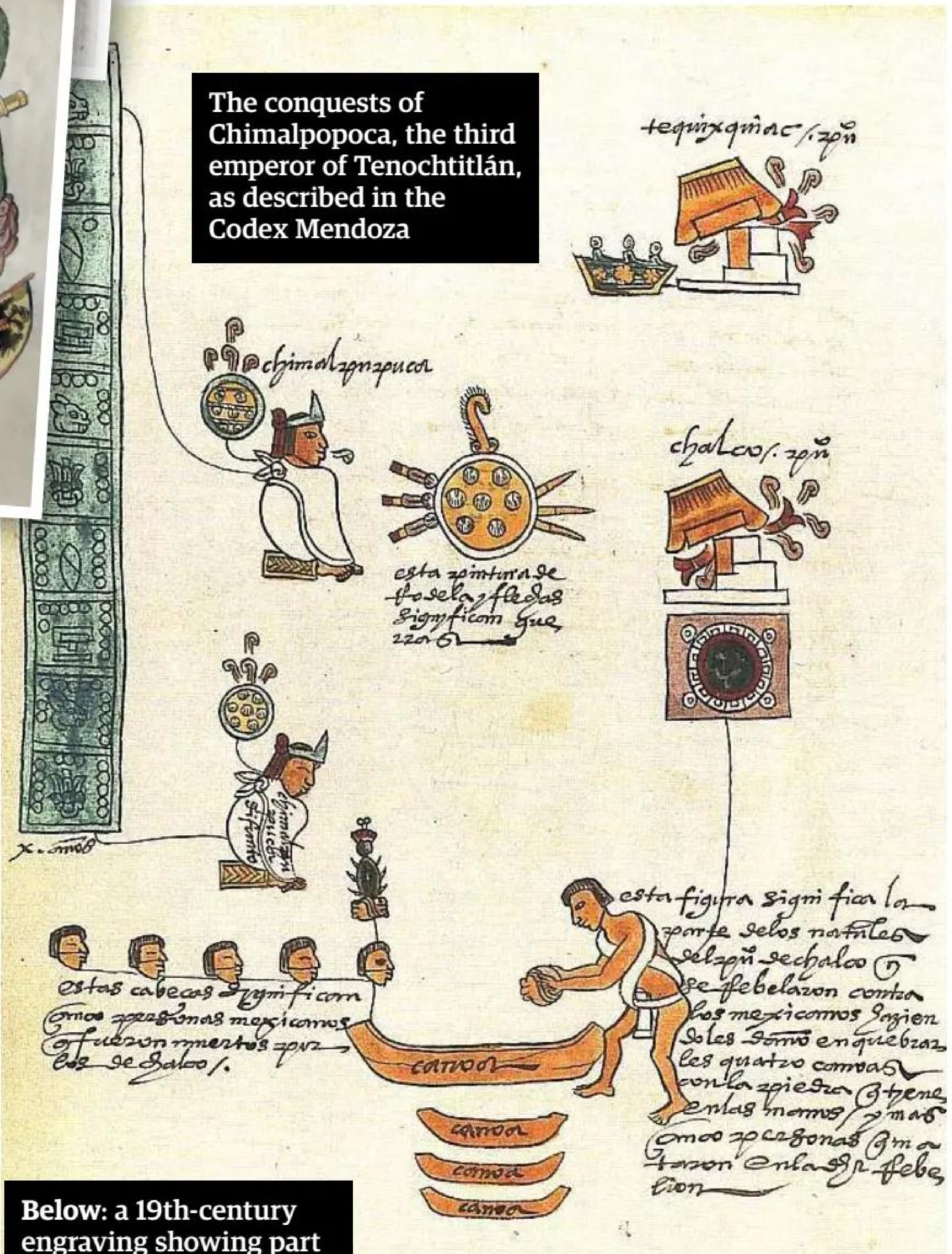
Vol 4. page 481.
A place of Mexpico where the Mexicans were call'd
A place of Grotts
The place of Thistle flowers
A Burning Serpent
A place of Divine fruit
A whirl pool where the Water is swallow'd
Earthen Vessels
An Herb with broad Leaves
This figure signifies 124 years, or the intervall of time was call'd Chimalhuacan

didn't have to serve in the military, pay tributes or hold religious roles.

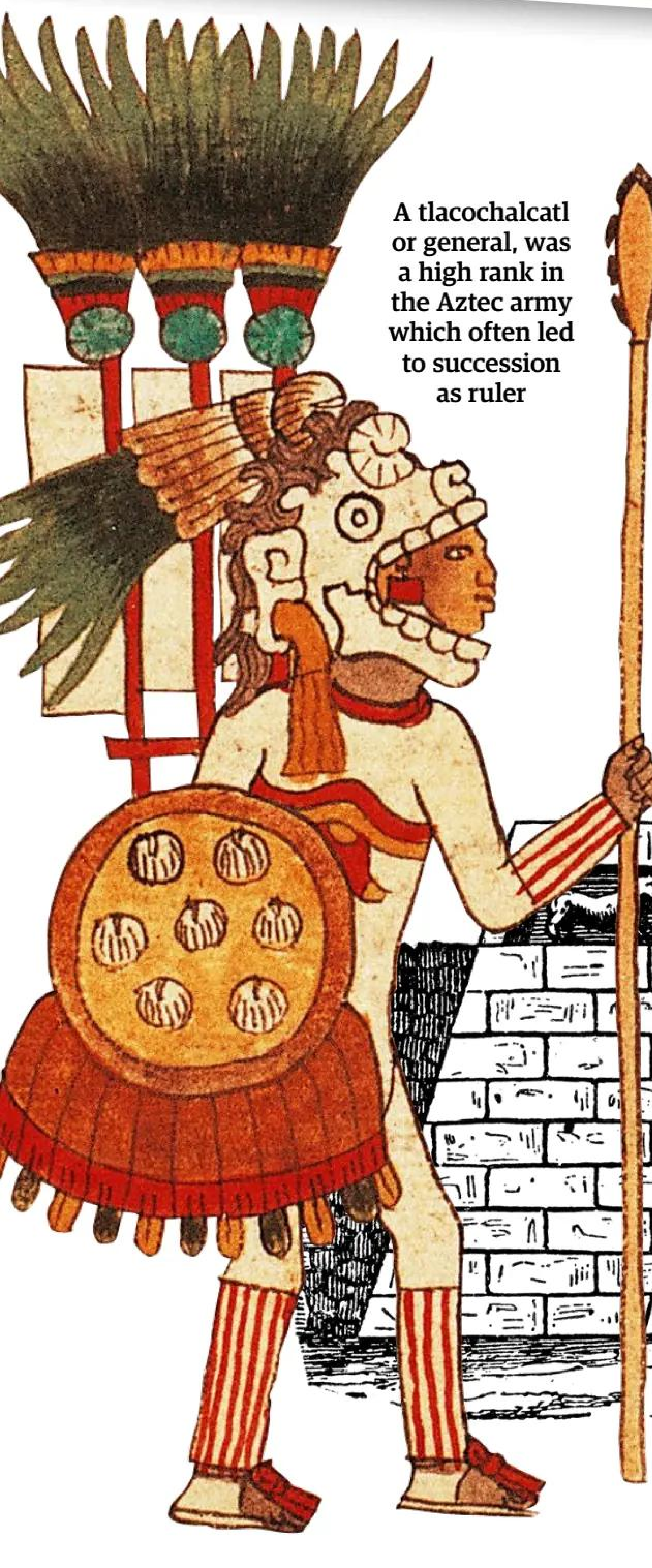
The Codex Mendoza also reveals that lots of social changes were made during the reign of Moctezuma I (1440-1469). Described as "very serious, severe and virtuous...of good temper and judgement, and an enemy of evil...", Moctezuma successfully conquered 33 new lands and oversaw a transformation in Aztec attitudes to class. The macehualtin (lower class) were now required to serve the pipiltin (upper class) if they wanted to rise through the ranks themselves and get jobs. There was also a third class, the tlatlacotin. These were slaves, a punishment they were forced to endure for committing crimes or refusing to pay debts. Providing they kept up their repayments, a tlatlacotin could be restored to a macehualtin but those who didn't could find themselves on the sacrificial altar.

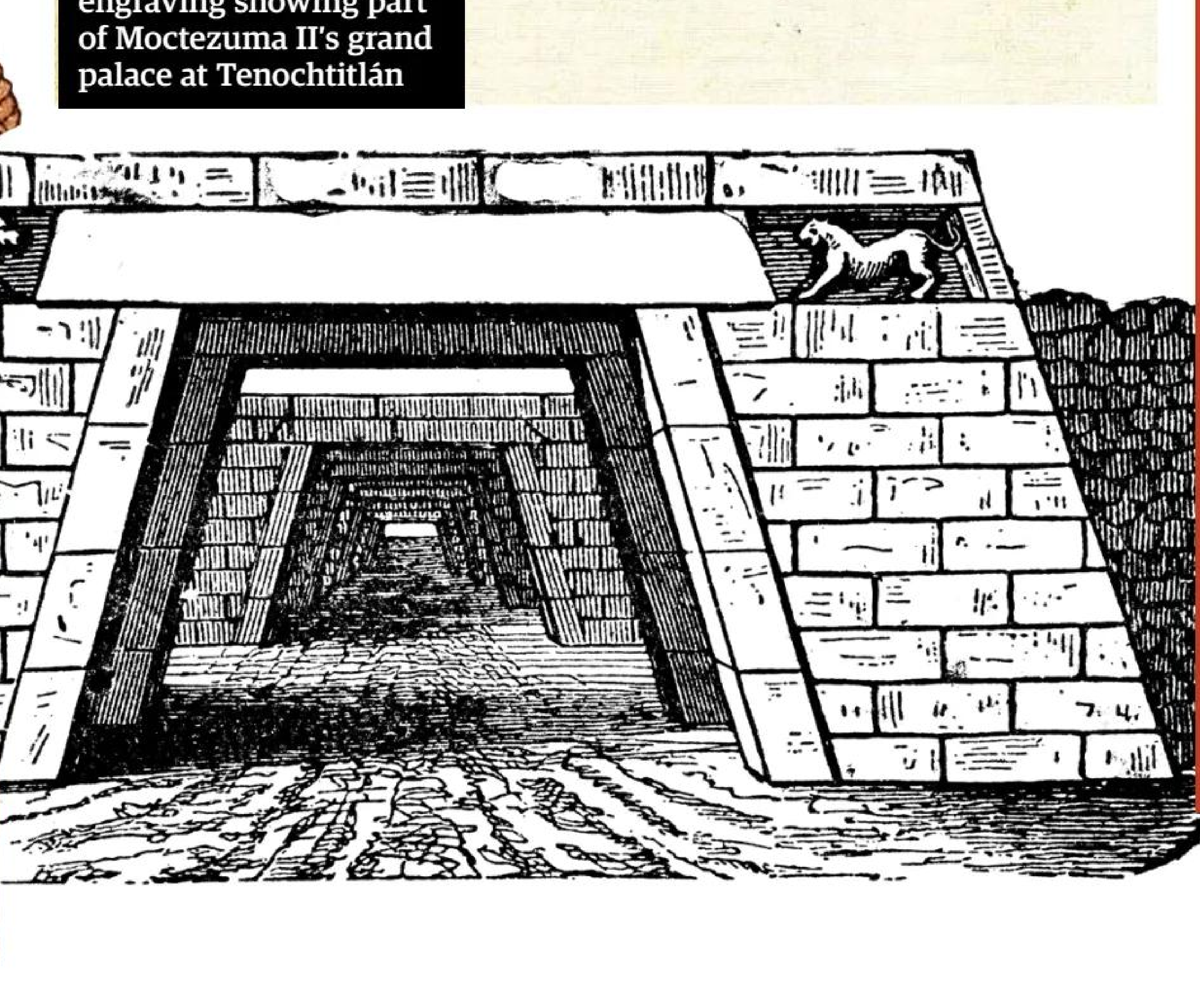
Perhaps one aspect which characterises the Aztecs' success was not just a savvy political and economic strategy for expansion, but also their ability to adapt and respond to crisis. The 15th century in particular brought huge problems and challenges. 1446 saw a plague of locusts which destroyed the crops through the valley and in 1449 Tenochtitlán was hit by a devastating flood. Moctezuma sought help from neighbouring Texcoco and ordered the construction of a giant dike to protect against further flooding, but in 1450 disaster struck for a third time when a famine struck the city. For four years this was bearable as the Aztecs had stockpiled well, but by 1454 it had become a huge problem. The famine may also explain some of the social changes that took place during Moctezuma's reign, since those who could not afford to feed themselves sold themselves into the slavery of those that could. The famine came to an end in 1455, when the New Fire ceremony – which was only observed once every 52 years – was due to take place. Despite these setbacks the Aztecs began their new calendar cycle more resilient than ever, building on all they had learned from their earliest days in Aztlán and as mercenaries-for-hire, ready to conquer even further into the Valley of Mexico.

This map shows the extent of the Aztec capital on Lake Texcoco in the early 16th century



The conquests of Chimalpopoca, the third emperor of Tenochtitlán, as described in the Codex Mendoza


A tlacochalcatl or general, was a high rank in the Aztec army which often led to succession as ruler

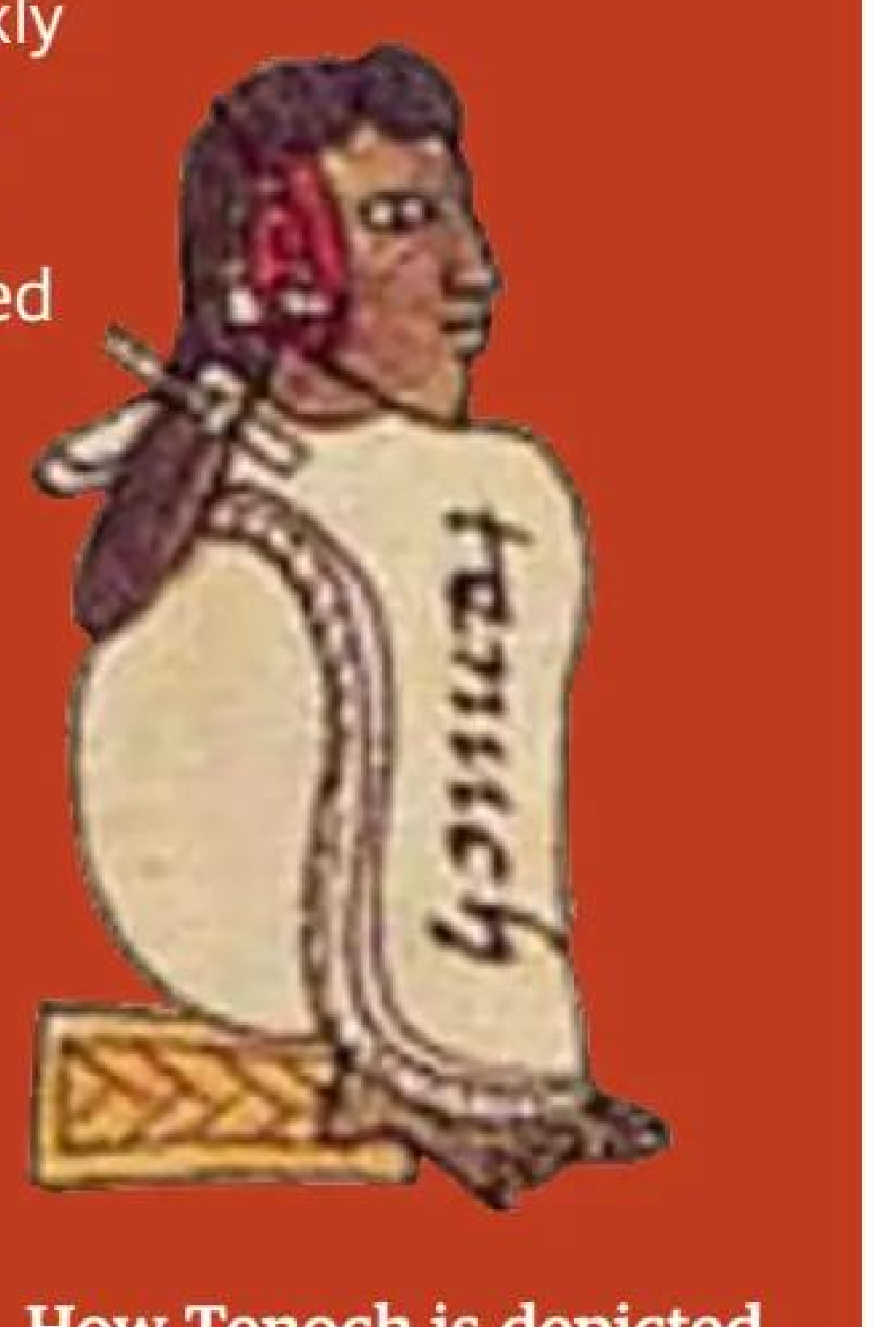

Below: a 19th-century engraving showing part of Moctezuma II's grand palace at Tenochtitlán

Tenoch – man or myth?

Who was the mysterious figure that Tenochtitlán was named after?

As with many figures and events in the Aztec empire, it's not entirely clear whether the man after whom the great lake city was named was actually real. It's possible Tenoch was a retrospective, fictional character specially designed to shore up the mythical founding of the Aztec Empire – or, he may have been a real person whose role was later embellished for political purposes.

Either way, it is said that Tenoch was a senior priest, though never a tlatoani (ruler/king). He had been appointed to his post by a council of elders, and is prominently listed in the Codex Mendoza on its front page, alongside the other leaders. His glyph is a rock and a prickly pear cactus – referring to the legendary symbols that the Aztecs saw when they reached Lake Texcoco. His entry is particularly notable for the fact his rule is listed as lasting nearly an Aztec century – 52 years. Tenochtitlán was therefore said to have been founded in 1325, and Tenoch died between 1370 and 1375 – so it's certainly possible the city could have been renamed in his honour.



How Tenoch is depicted in the Codex Mendoza

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LIFE & SOCIETY

It's easy to forget that the Aztecs were real people like us, with lives, families - and even hobbies

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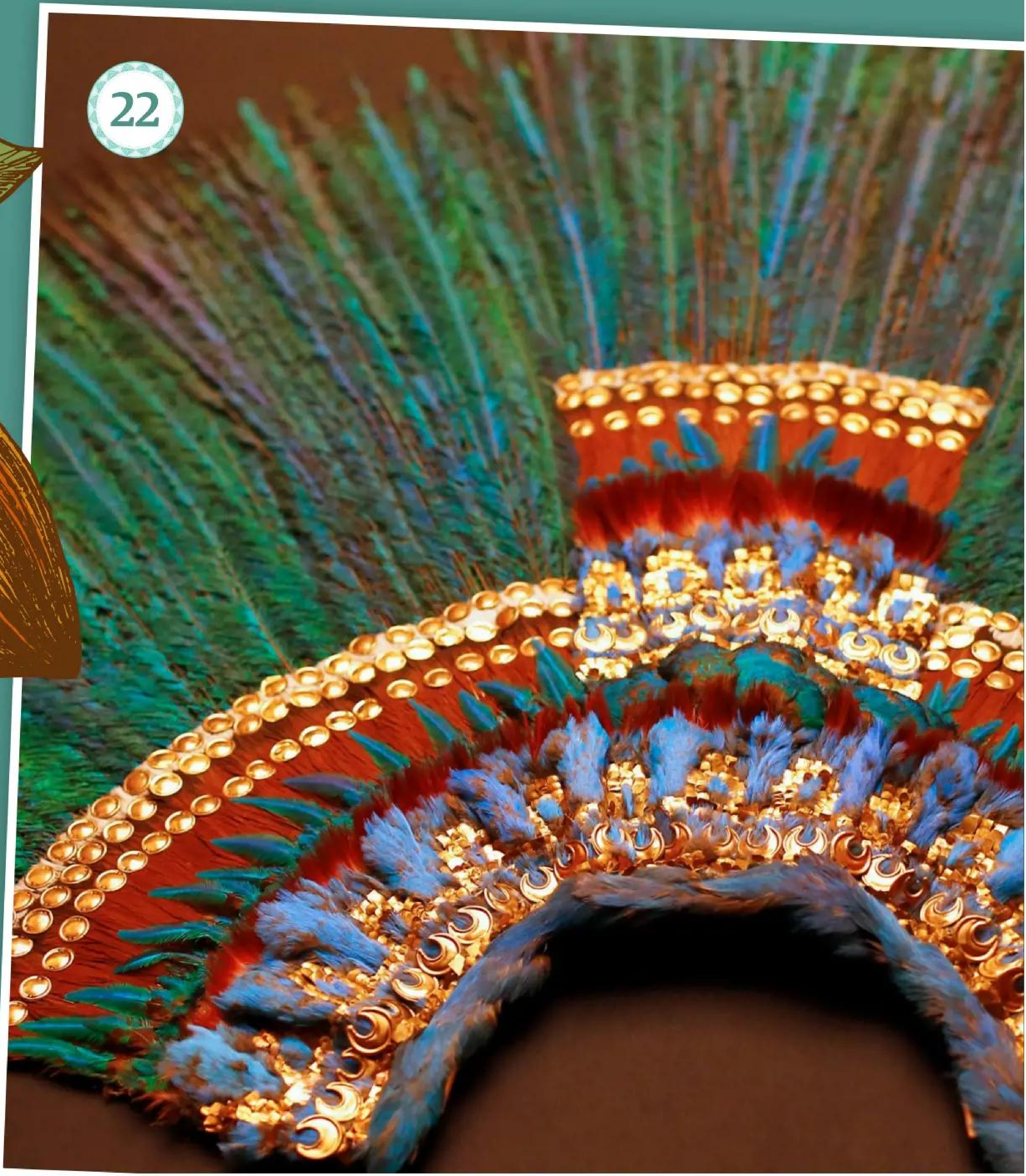

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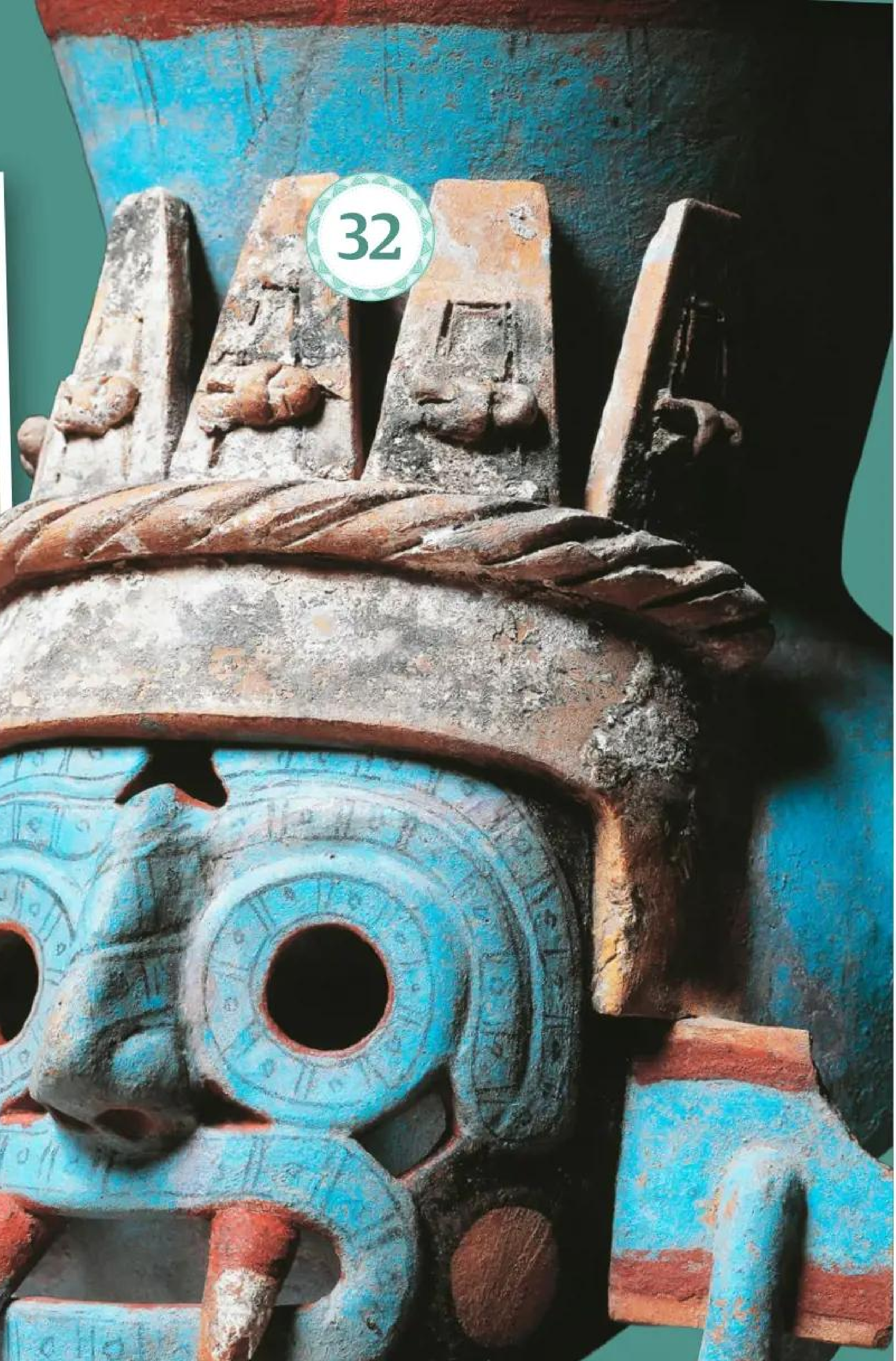
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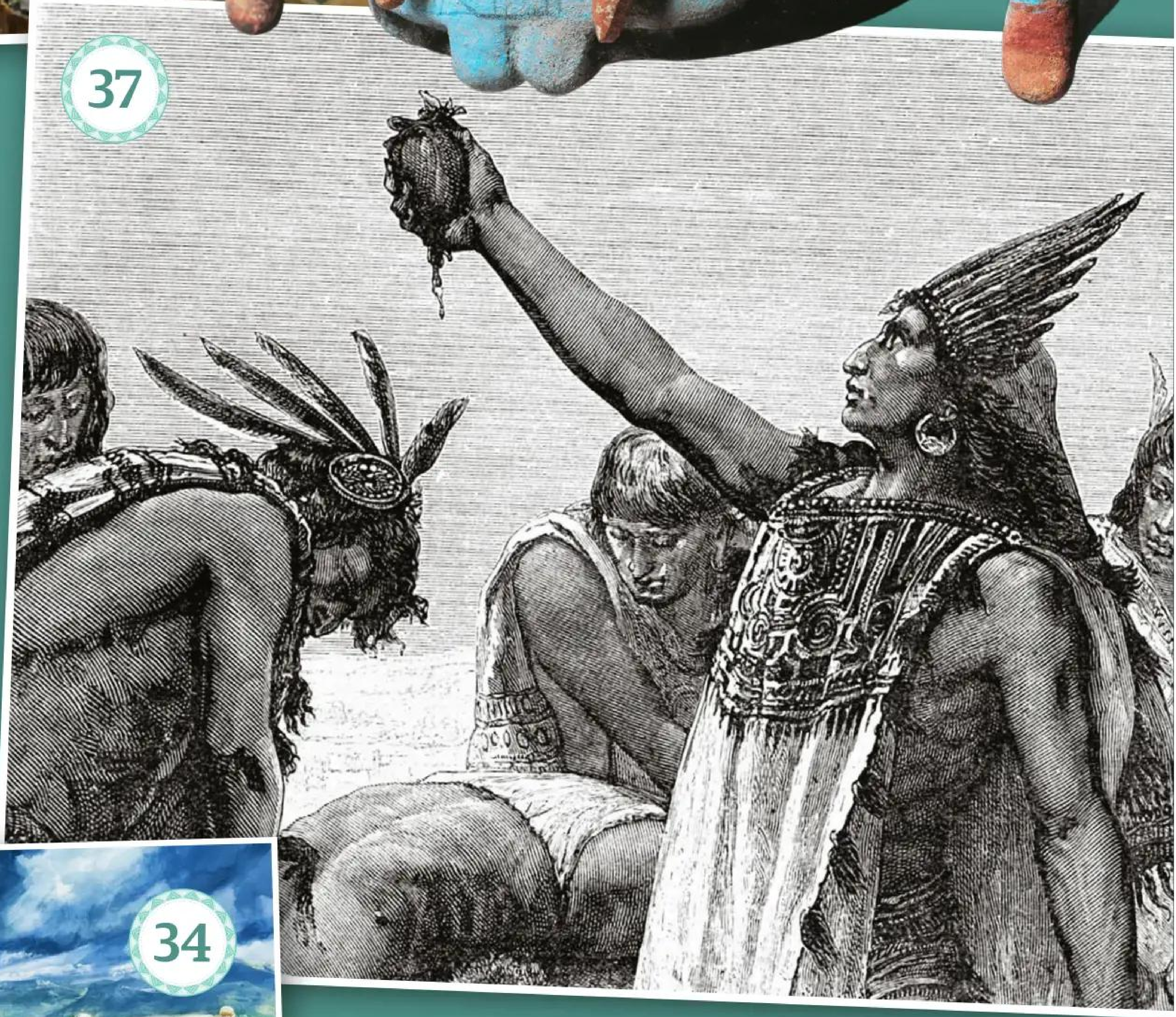
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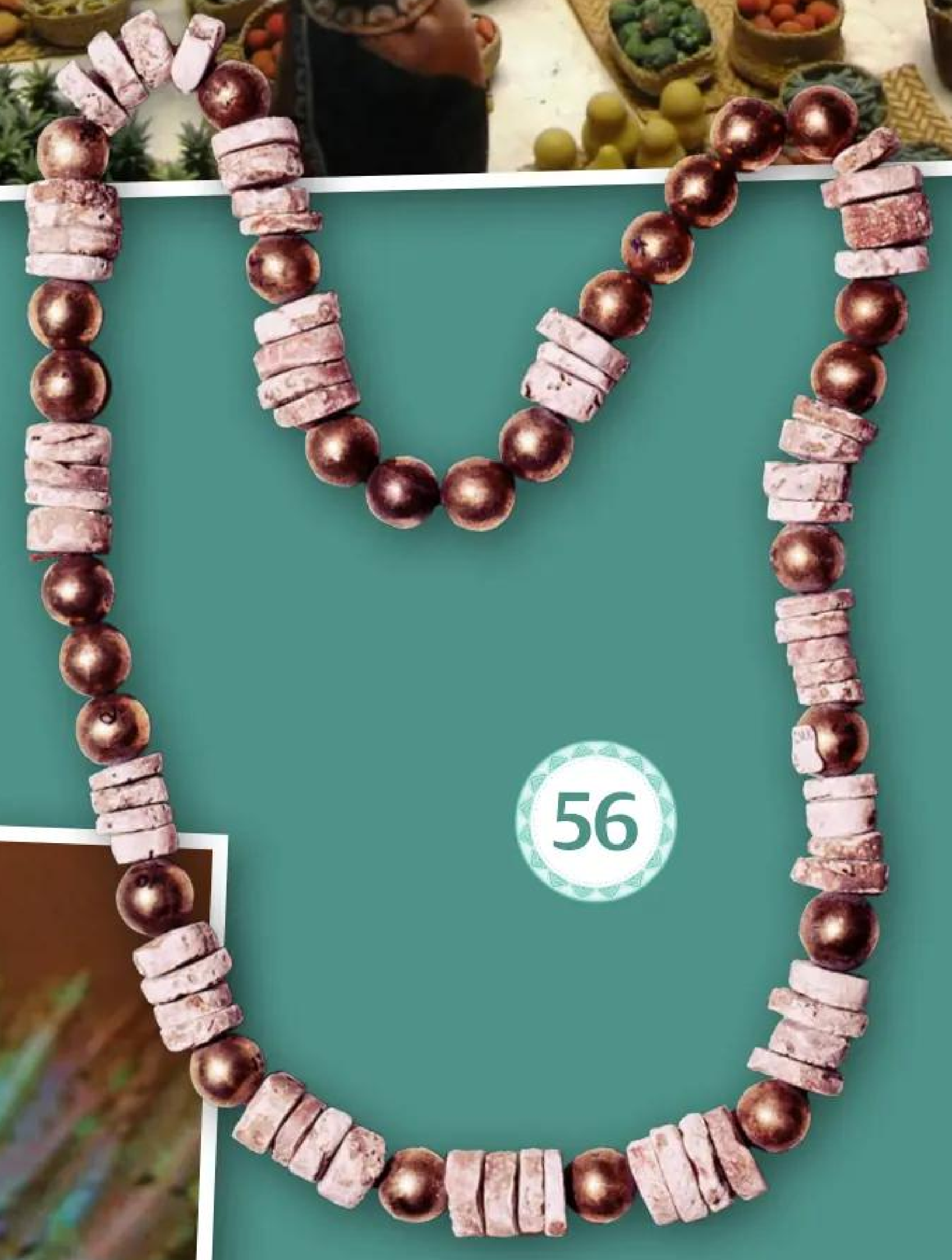
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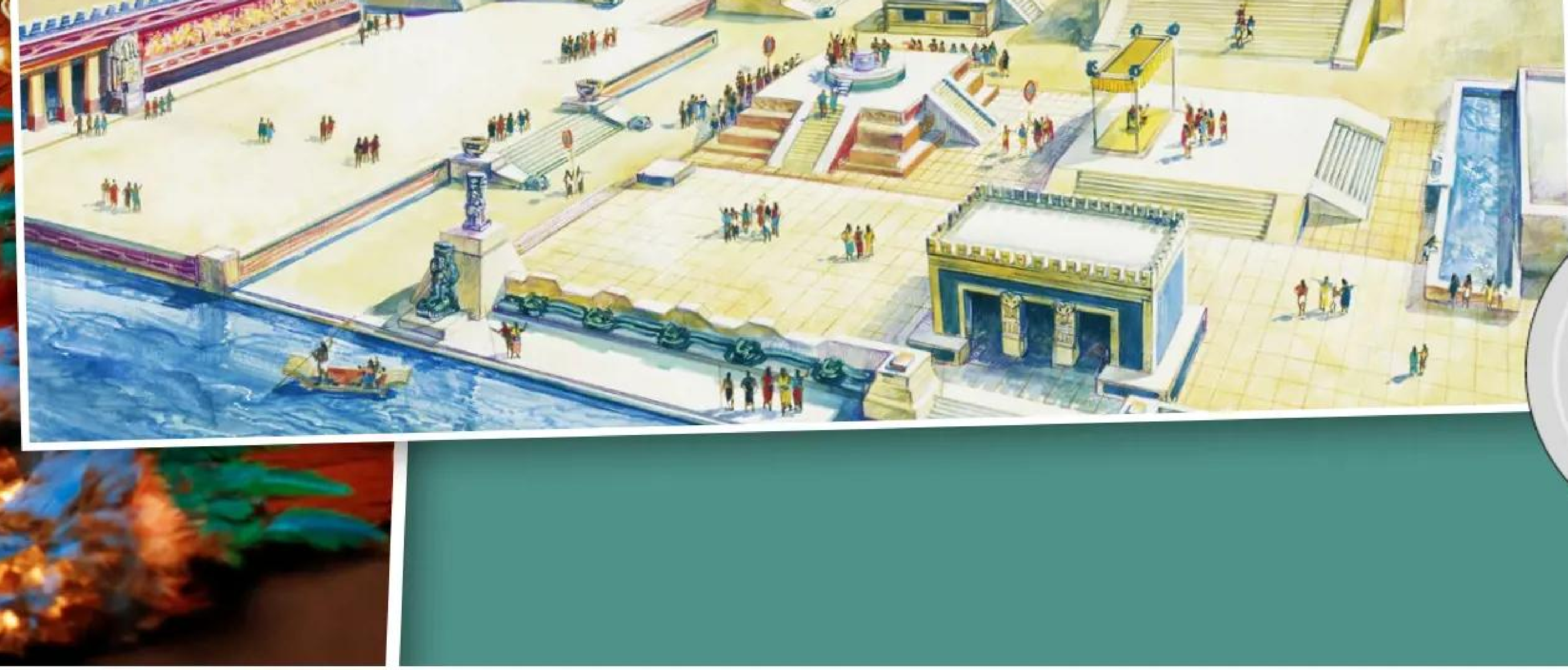
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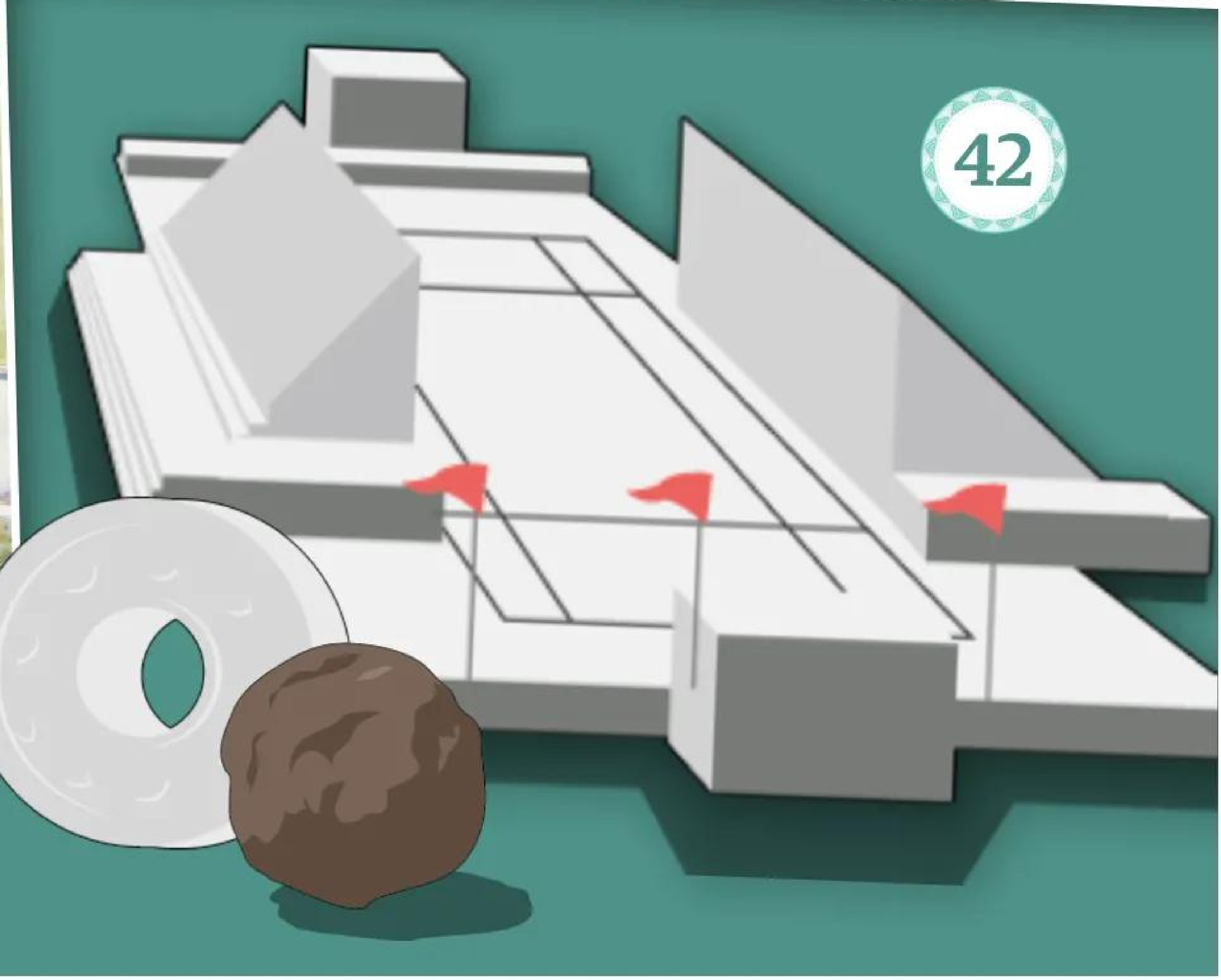
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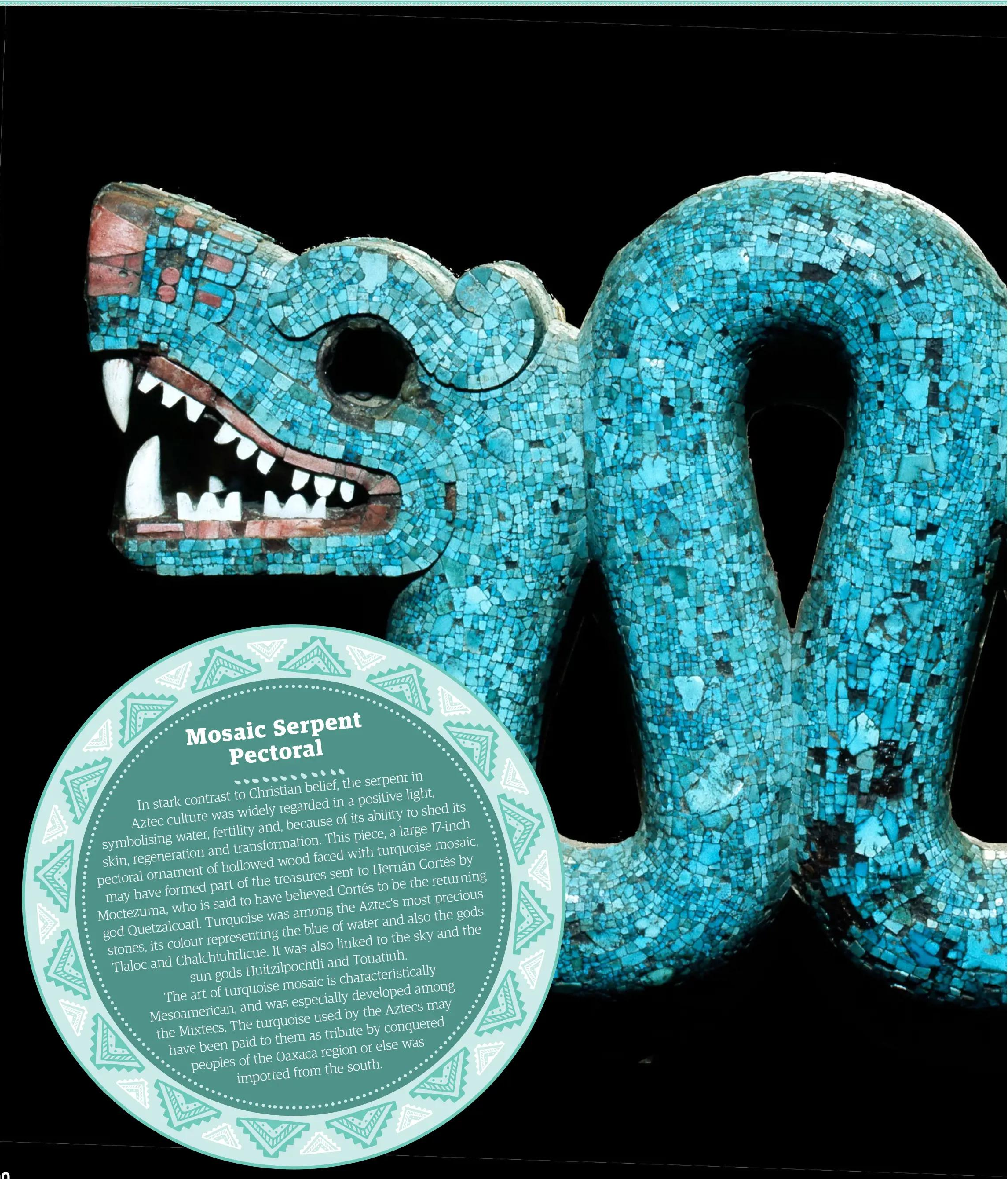
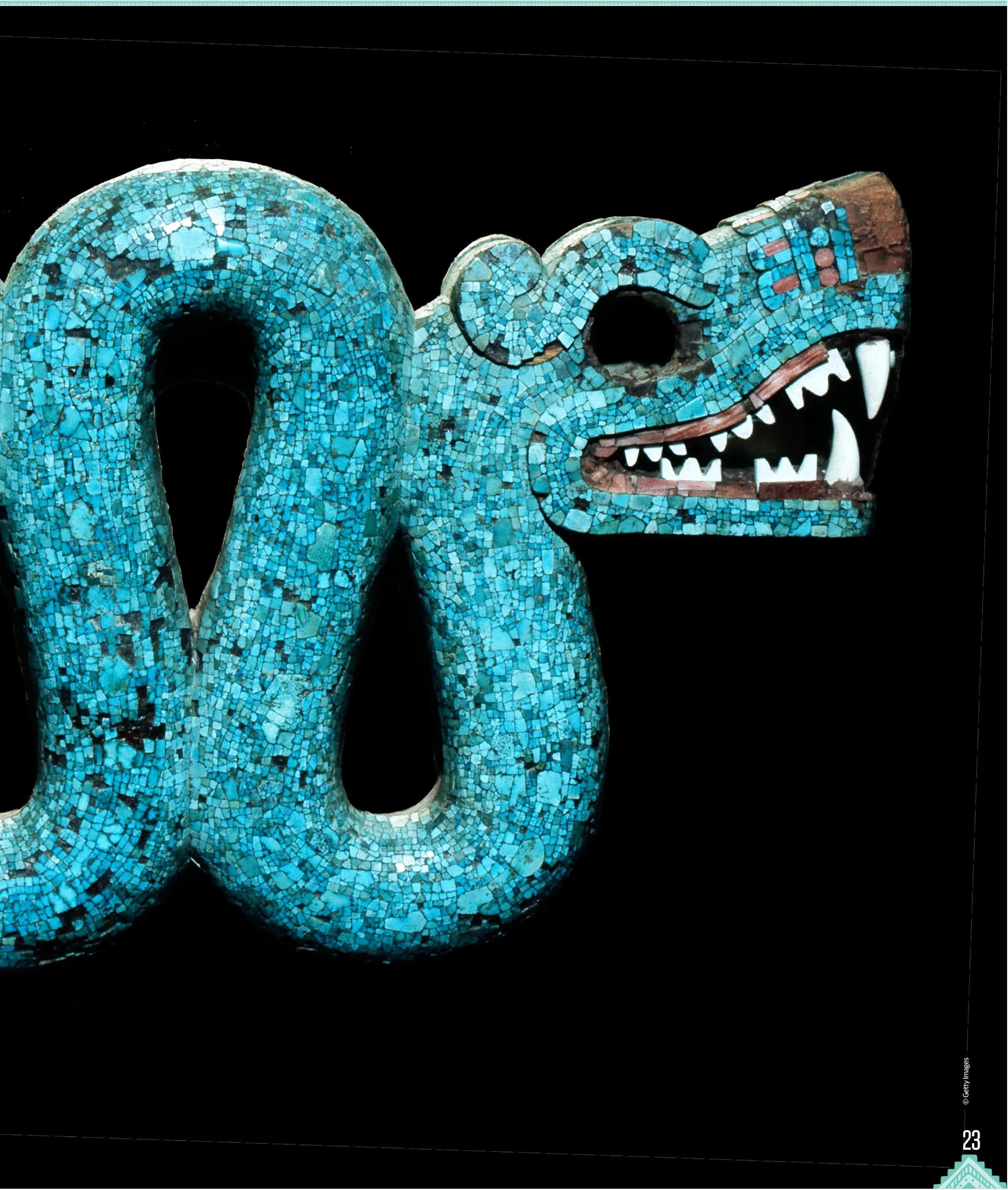


Mosaic Serpent Pectoral

In stark contrast to Christian belief, the serpent in Aztec culture was widely regarded in a positive light, symbolising water, fertility and, because of its ability to shed its skin, regeneration and transformation. This piece, a large 17-inch pectoral ornament of hollowed wood faced with turquoise mosaic, may have formed part of the treasures sent to Hernán Cortés by Moctezuma, who is said to have believed Cortés to be the returning god Quetzalcoatl. Turquoise was among the Aztec's most precious stones, its colour representing the blue of water and also the gods Tlaloc and Chalchiuhtlicue. It was also linked to the sky and the sun gods Huitzilpochtli and Tonatiuh.

The art of turquoise mosaic is characteristically Mesoamerican, and was especially developed among the Mixtecs. The turquoise used by the Aztecs may have been paid to them as tribute by conquered peoples of the Oaxaca region or else was imported from the south.



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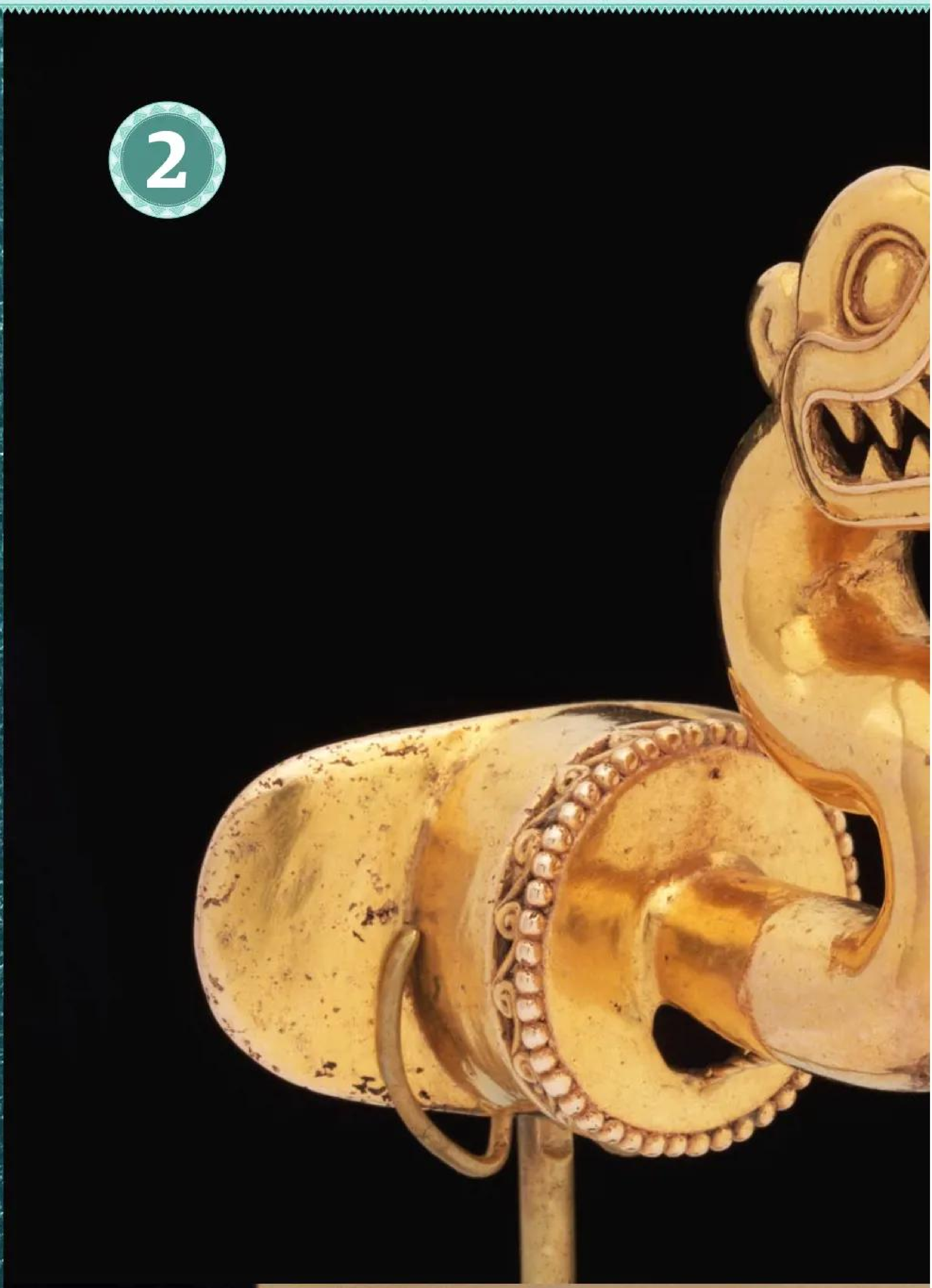


3

1 Golden Pendant

This gold pendant, dating from 1200–1521, no doubt belonged to a high-ranking official; the four metal bells at the hem were favoured items among the Aztec nobility. Gold was relatively new to the Aztecs and was regarded as less important than greenstone or quetzal feathers, though it was highly coveted by the conquistadors.

2 Hissing Serpent

Labrets like this would be worn as piercings on the chin, underneath the lower lip. They symbolised political power and military success, only awarded to the highest members of society. This serpent was designed to inspire fear and awe in those gazing upon it. Its tongue was actually moveable, and could be retracted as the wearer desired.

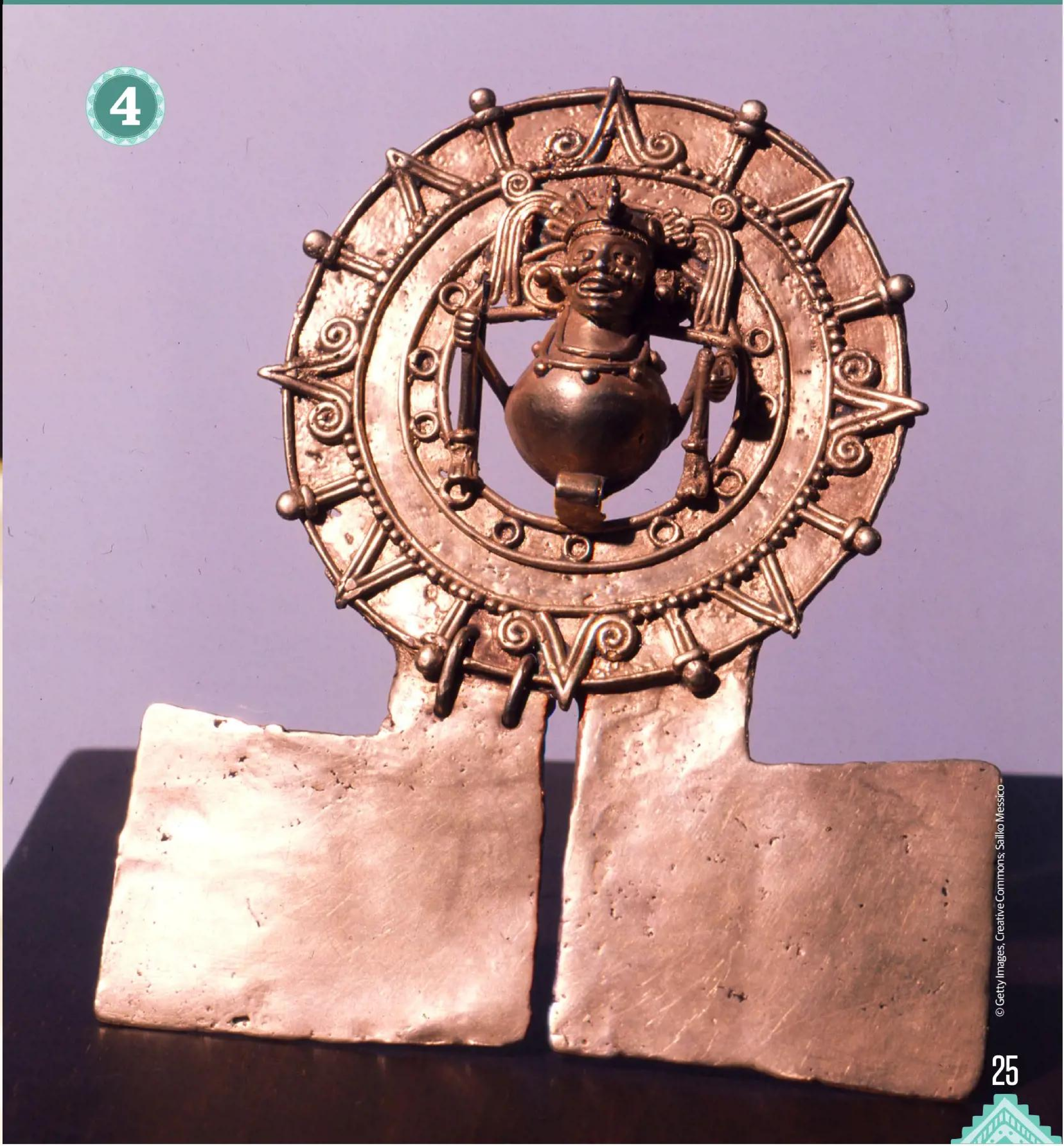
3 Golden Necklace

The frog appears less regularly in Aztec art than the jaguar, snake or dog, but along with the turtle it was associated with water, rain and the sustenance they provide. The frog is further linked to fertility as it lays many eggs and adopts a squatting position similar to that of women in childbirth. The necklace is thought to be of Mixtec origin.

4 Golden Deity

The goldsmiths of the Mixtecs made many lightweight, delicate and intricate decorative items with strong figurative components. This piece is a breast ornament and employs solar symbolism. Indeed, the sun disc is one of the most important emblems in Aztec art, and expresses the rational order of time.

4



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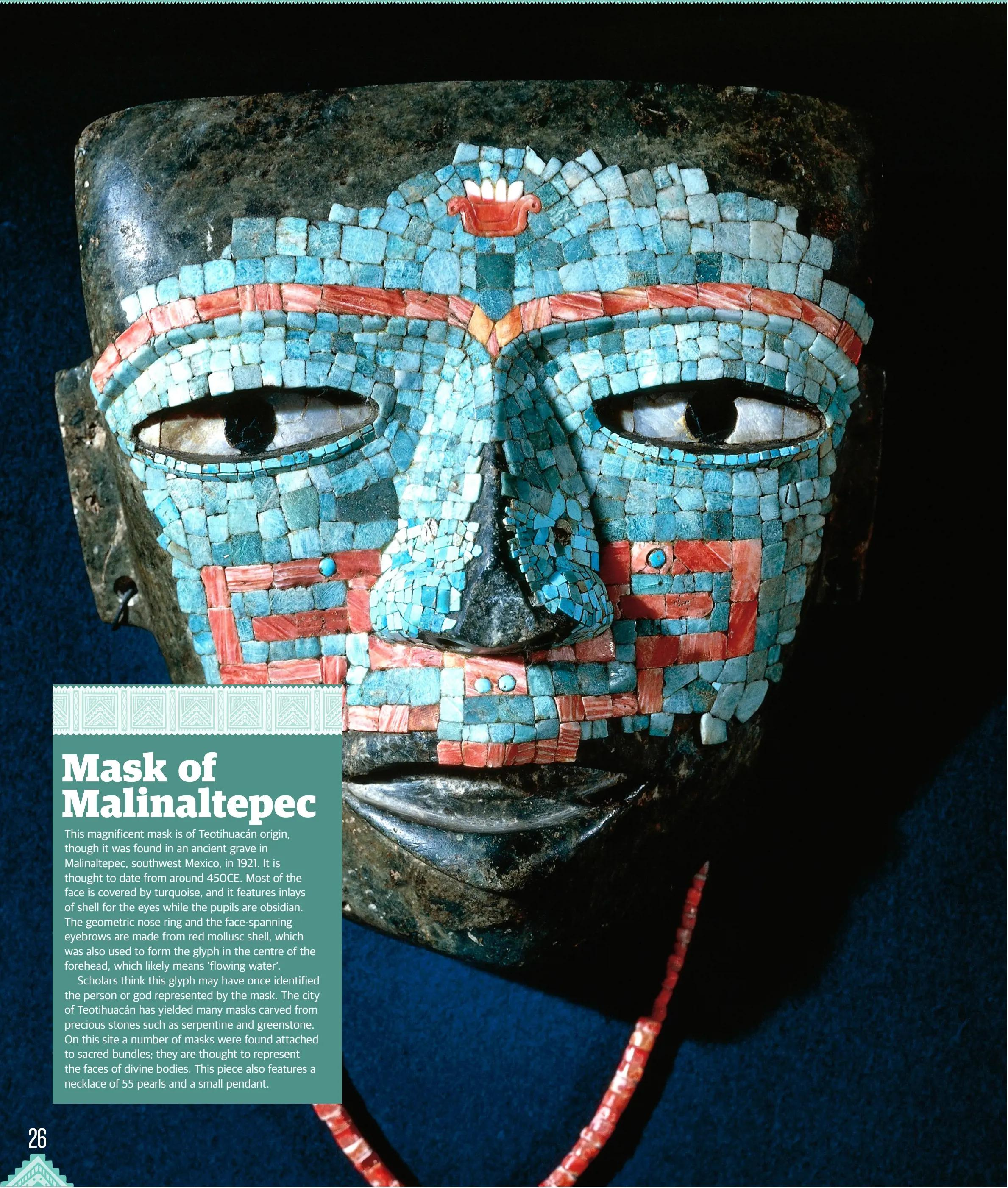
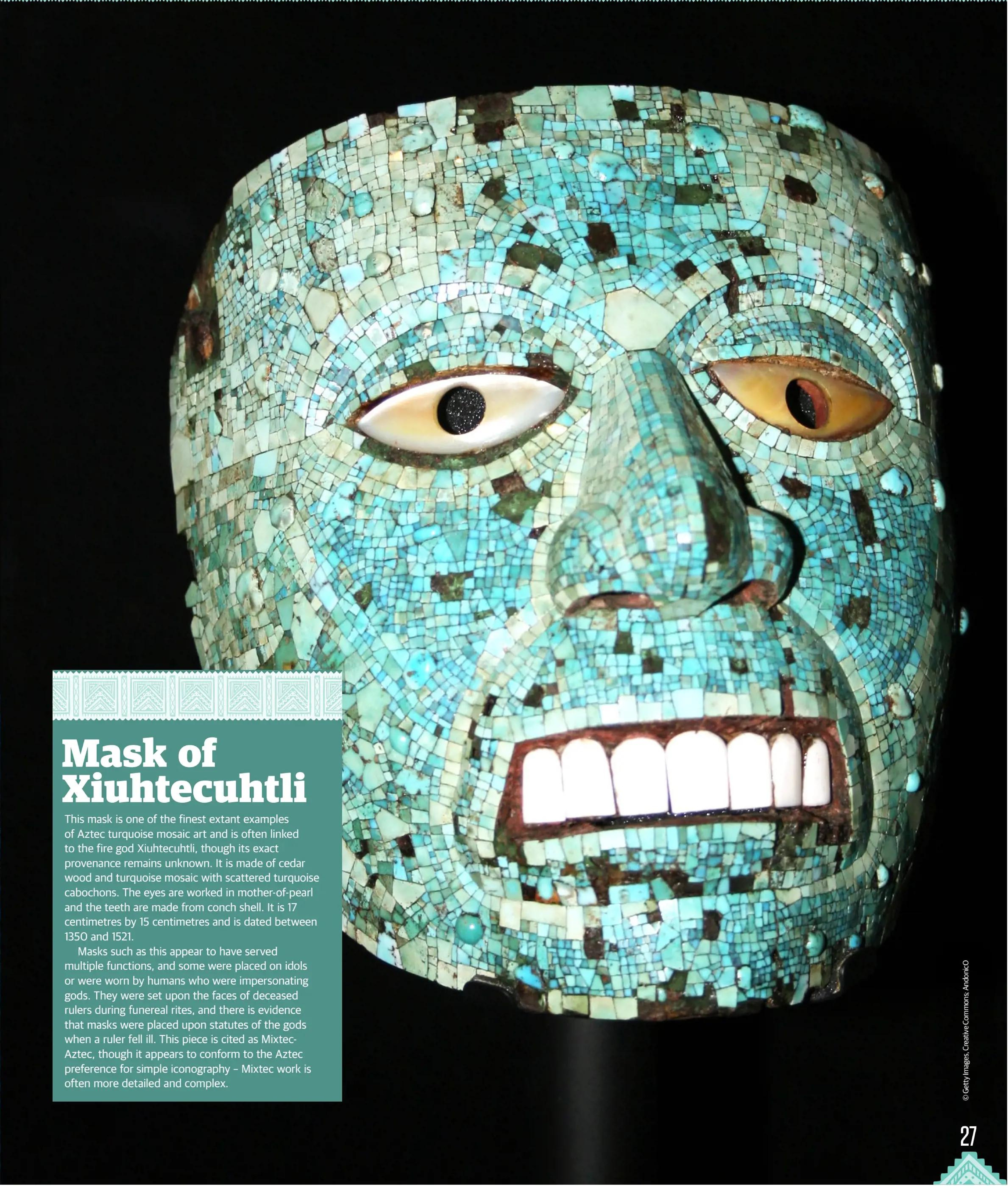


Mask of Malinaltepec

This magnificent mask is of Teotihuacán origin, though it was found in an ancient grave in Malinaltepec, southwest Mexico, in 1921. It is thought to date from around 450CE. Most of the face is covered by turquoise, and it features inlays of shell for the eyes while the pupils are obsidian. The geometric nose ring and the face-spanning eyebrows are made from red mollusc shell, which was also used to form the glyph in the centre of the forehead, which likely means 'flowing water'.

Scholars think this glyph may have once identified the person or god represented by the mask. The city of Teotihuacán has yielded many masks carved from precious stones such as serpentine and greenstone. On this site a number of masks were found attached to sacred bundles; they are thought to represent the faces of divine bodies. This piece also features a necklace of 55 pearls and a small pendant.



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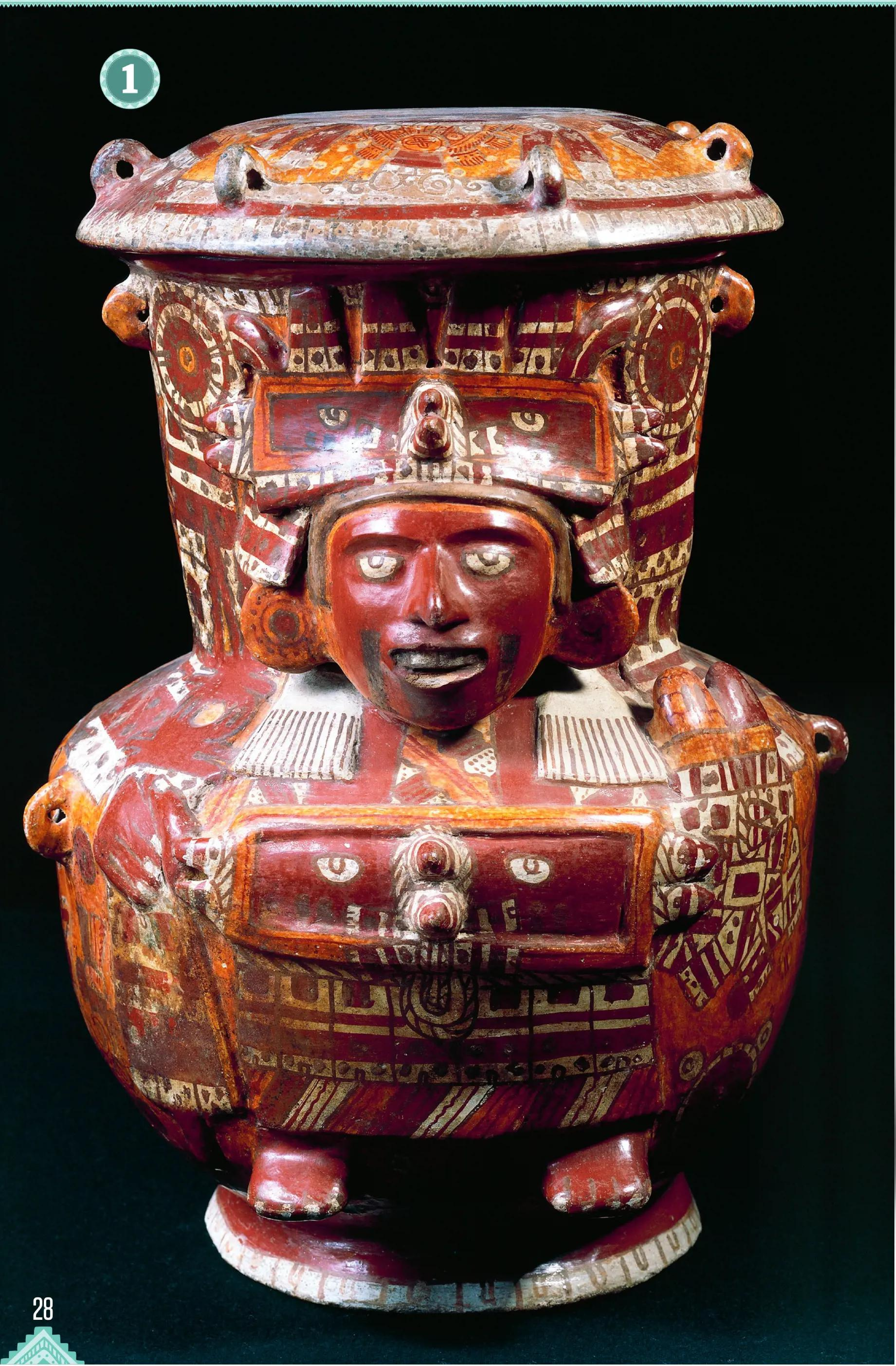
Mask of Xiuhtecuhtli

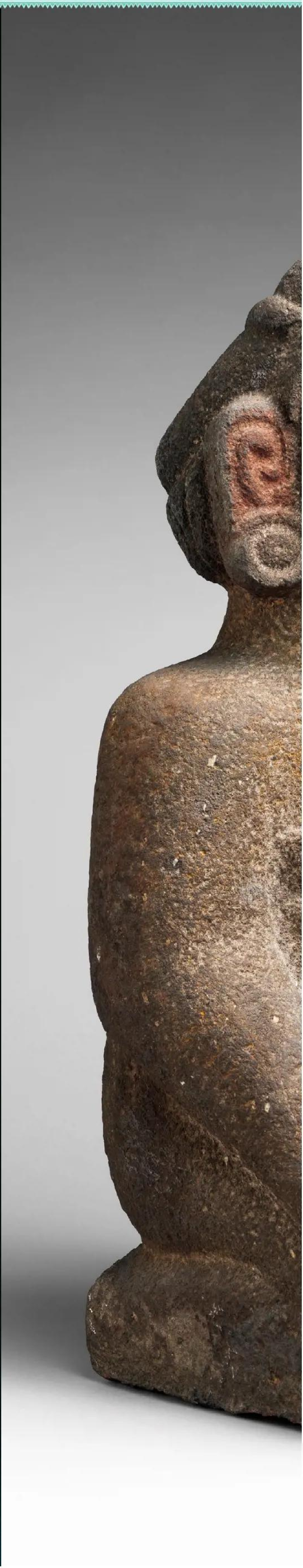
This mask is one of the finest extant examples of Aztec turquoise mosaic art and is often linked to the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli, though its exact provenance remains unknown. It is made of cedar wood and turquoise mosaic with scattered turquoise cabochons. The eyes are worked in mother-of-pearl and the teeth are made from conch shell. It is 17 centimetres by 15 centimetres and is dated between 1350 and 1521.

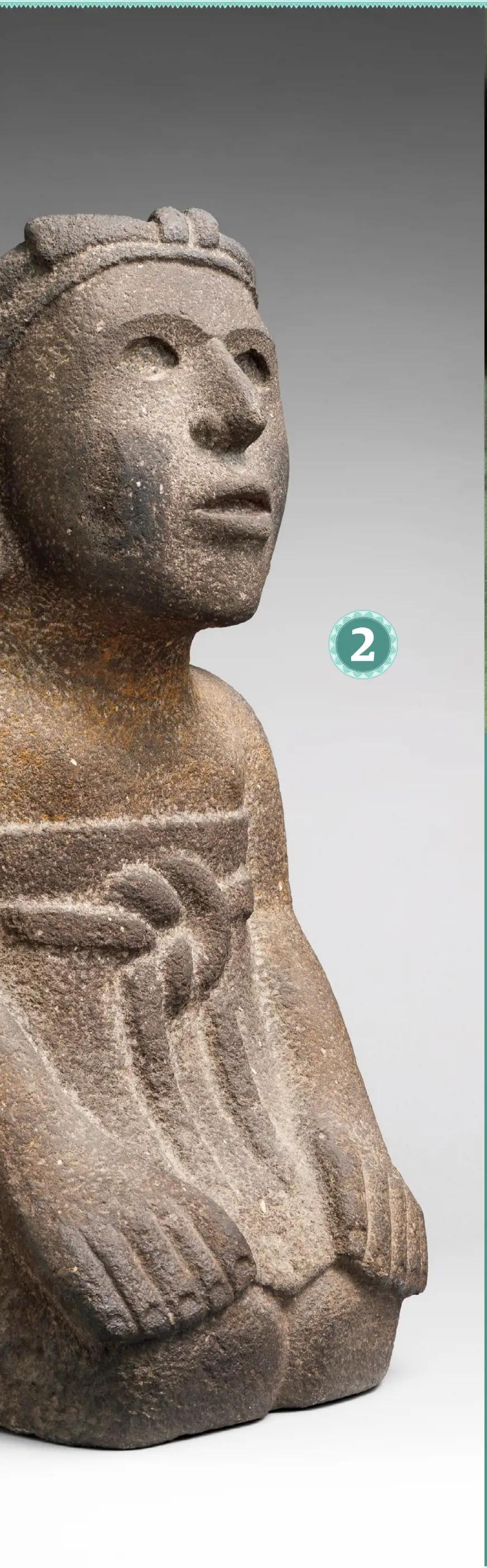
Masks such as this appear to have served multiple functions, and some were placed on idols or were worn by humans who were impersonating gods. They were set upon the faces of deceased rulers during funereal rites, and there is evidence that masks were placed upon statutes of the gods when a ruler fell ill. This piece is cited as Mixtec-Aztec, though it appears to conform to the Aztec preference for simple iconography – Mixtec work is often more detailed and complex.

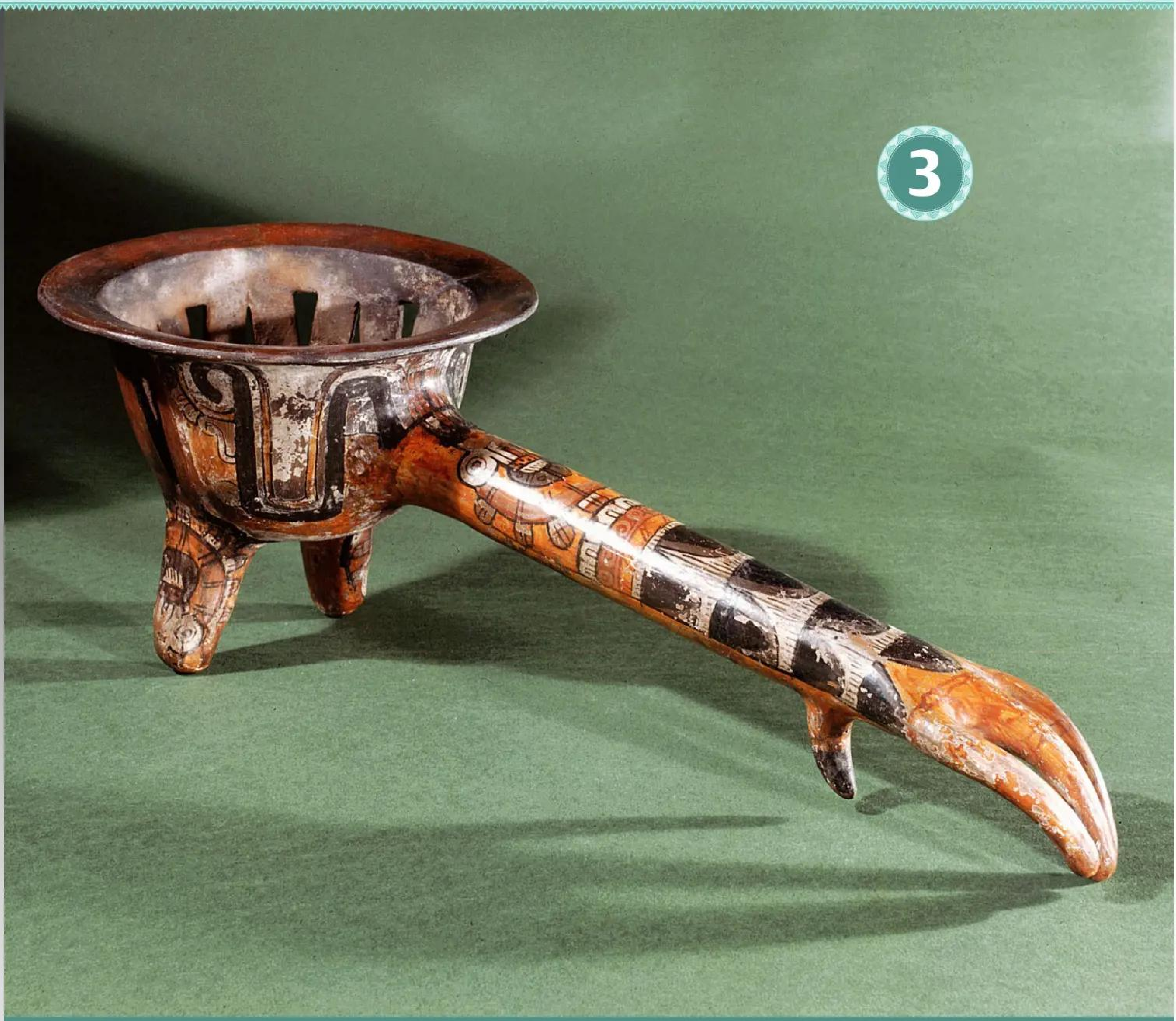
Aztec Art: Pottery and Stonework

1









1 Chicomecóatl Jar

This effigy pot is an example of a ceramic from Cholula, Puebla, and features two gods intimately related to fertility – Chicomecóatl, the goddess of sustenance, and the god of rain, Tlaloc. One god features on each side. Chicomecóatl is facing outwards in this photo. Her name translates as 'seven serpents', and she was the primary goddess of maintenance and sustenance – the maize goddess who ruled the cult of corn. She stood as one of the most ancient and important goddesses in the Valley of Mexico. The number seven in her name is associated with luck and generative power, while the snake was widely regarded as a symbol of regeneration.

2 Kneeling Woman

Aztec sculptors usually depicted human figures in one of three poses: standing, sitting or, as with this piece, kneeling. Women were usually shown kneeling with their hands on their knees. Aztec women were lauded as modest and industrious, and quintessentially female activities like grinding corn or weaving were conducted in this position. The statue's eyes and mouth are shown as recessed ovals, which once contained inlays. This statue may have been dressed as a deity on certain holy days.

3 Tezcatlipoca Incense Ladle

Incense ladles like this were an important part of Aztec ritual and this piece was used in the worship of Tezcatlipoca, the supreme deity of the late Aztec pantheon. He was a master of transformation, a trickster and widely associated with smoke and shadow. This ladle features one of his symbols, the smoking mirror, on its handle, which is formed in the shape of another of his symbols, the turkey claw.

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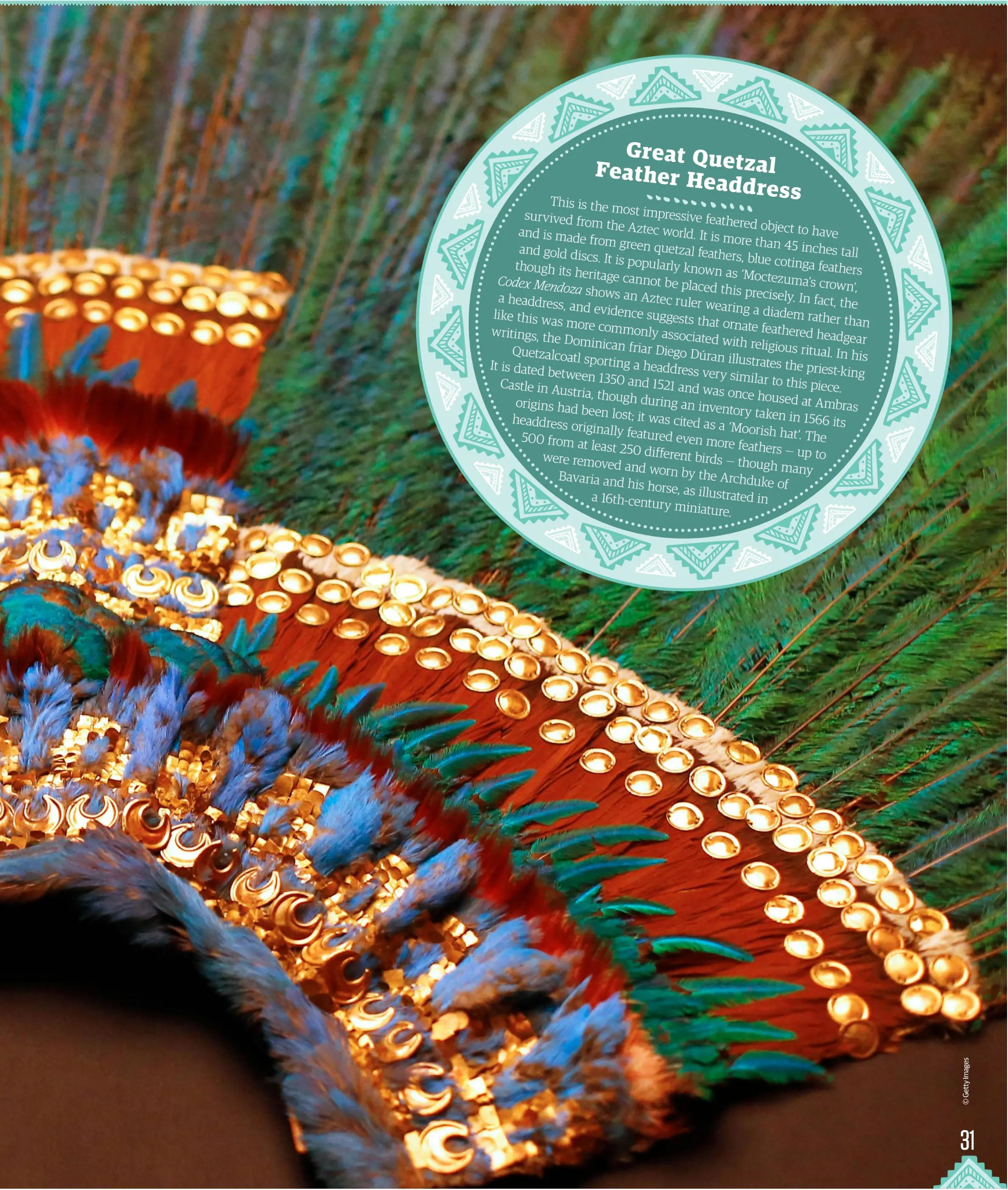

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Great Quetzal Feather Headdress

This is the most impressive feathered object to have survived from the Aztec world. It is more than 45 inches tall and is made from green quetzal feathers, blue cotinga feathers and gold discs. It is popularly known as 'Moctezuma's crown', though its heritage cannot be placed this precisely. In fact, the *Codex Mendoza* shows an Aztec ruler wearing a diadem rather than a headdress, and evidence suggests that ornate feathered headgear like this was more commonly associated with religious ritual. In his writings, the Dominican friar Diego Dúran illustrates the priest-king Quetzalcoatl sporting a headdress very similar to this piece. It is dated between 1350 and 1521 and was once housed at Ambras Castle in Austria, though during an inventory taken in 1566 its origins had been lost; it was cited as a 'Moorish hat'. The headdress originally featured even more feathers – up to 500 from at least 250 different birds – though many were removed and worn by the Archduke of Bavaria and his horse, as illustrated in a 16th-century miniature.

Aztec Religion

Religion & Beliefs

With a pantheon of gods, human sacrifice and an array of colourful festivals, religion permeated every aspect of Aztec life

Written by Frances White

The Aztec sun stone, carved circa 1500 CE. The monolithic artefact depicts important aspects of the Aztec calendar and cosmology

It is nigh on impossible to consider almost any aspect of Aztec life, society and culture without understanding the religious beliefs that underpinned all these things. Religion defined life for the Aztecs, no decision was made without considering its religious significance. Every event, small or large, was organised by consulting the religious calendar. Aztec parents could not even name their own child before a priest or religious figure decreed which name would best fit the infant's destiny in life. Religion was not just a part of Aztec society, it *was* Aztec society. From the highest born kings to the lowest slave, religion was the driving force behind – and defining factor in – each person's life.

The Aztecs believed that the world was divided into three parts: the earth world inhabited by humans, the underworld called Mictlan and the upper plane in the sky, inaccessible to humans. It was believed that the point of existence was to constantly straddle the two worlds in an unending cycle of birth, life, death and then rebirth. The sky and underworld were both believed to possess multiple layers; the sky had thirteen layers (with the highest deity residing at the very top) and the underworld had nine. Places like mountains and caves served as important bridges between the human world and these celestial planes and were associated with specific gods. As such, these places held great symbolic value to the Aztecs.

Every part of life was associated with different deities, and in order to achieve success in them, the Aztecs believed that these gods must be 'paid' in the form of sacrifice. This could take the form of simple gifts such as flowers or food, but for the greatest result, the gods demanded blood. It was thought that the gods fed on blood, therefore the greatest sacrifice (and greatest reward) would come from the blood of humans. It was not just captives or commoners sacrificed to sate the gods, but people from all levels of society – rich or poor, old or young, male or female.

The Aztec creation myth states that the gods tried to make the world five times before, but those previous attempts failed due to infighting amongst the deities. The first creator, Tezcatlipoca, was dethroned, so he turned into a jaguar and destroyed the world in revenge. The next four attempts had similar stories, with the world being destroyed each time though natural disasters. Each time, with each rebirth, different creator-gods would alternate in being the sun. Fed up with these repeated failings, the gods decided that one would have to sacrifice themselves to be the new sun. Tecucitzécatl (a strong, powerful god) was invited to have the honour, but he was unable to go through with it. Instead, Nanahuatzin (a weak, sickly god) sacrificed himself in Tecucitzécatl's place. While Nanahuatzin became the sun, it was too weak to move and got stuck in the sky, so the other gods realised they would have to make their own sacrifices to fix it. By feeding the new sun their blood, it began to move across the sky.

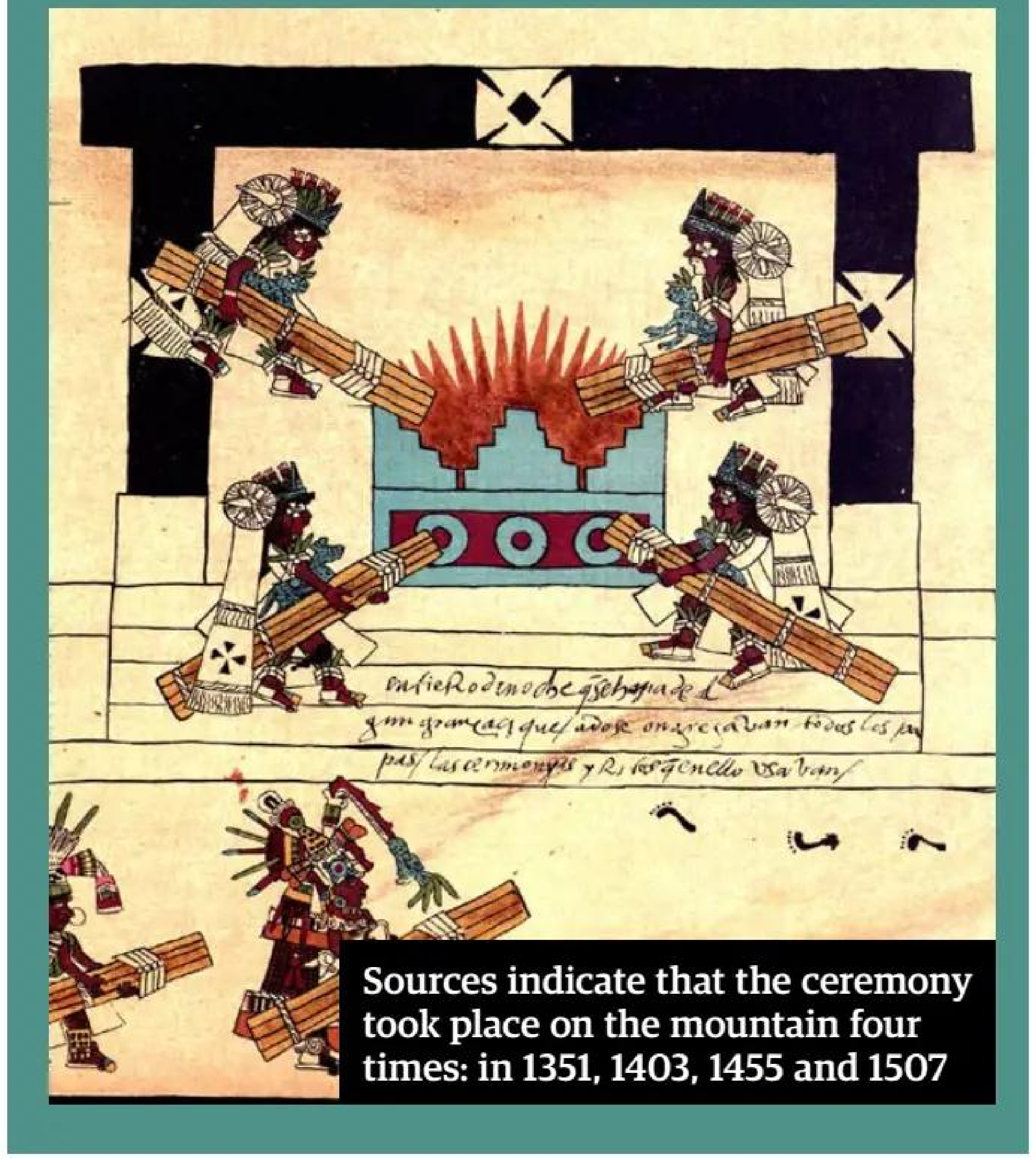
The New Fire ceremony

The ritual that prevented the end of the world

One of the most interesting and important Aztec traditions was the New Fire ceremony or the xiuhmolpilli ('binding of the years'). This was performed only once every 52 years, a full cycle of the Aztec calendar, and it was believed it would prevent the end of the world. It was thought that the shift from one calendar cycle to the next created instability and that the Tzitzimitl – female deities associated with the stars – would descend upon the Earth and devour it.

The preparations would begin early, five days before the ceremony, with people staying away from work, fasting, performing ritual cleansing and blood-letting and observing periods of silence.

All normal activities would cease, and every citizen was expected to get involved. Commoners would destroy their house utensils, and all fires were doused. Atop Mount Huixachtlan, when the constellation known as the 'fire drill' (to us, Orion's belt) rose above the horizon, a man would be sacrificed and his heart removed. A new fire would be started in his chest and the priests lit their torches from that flame. At night, people would watch as all the lights were ignited once more from this single sacrifice. New temple and house fires were lit, and the world began anew, with people buying new clothes, replacing their tools and utensils. The calendar would then start again, the world saved from destruction for another 52 years.



Sources indicate that the ceremony took place on the mountain four times: in 1351, 1403, 1455 and 1507

The idea and importance of sacrifice is apparent in this story. The creation of the world was only possible through sacrifice, and it was believed that the world could only be sustained and supported by humans also shedding their blood and give it to the gods. As long as humanity continued to repay the debt they owed to the gods, the sun would continue to move and sustain life. Several variations and different creation stories emerged in Aztec theology over time, but all involve a similar idea of sacrifice for the greater good, the concept of owing a debt to the gods and the power inherent in human blood.

The idea of keeping this perilous nature of the world in balance was a huge focus of Aztec religion. It was believed that one simple mistake could lead to shattering natural disasters. Not only could the weak sun stop moving, but the sky was also constantly battling between light and darkness and one day that battle would be lost. Aztec life revolved around preventing this day of defeat from coming, and paying a blood debt would aid the battle against darkness through blood-letting or actual human sacrifice. Those who were sacrificed would rise up to fight the powers of darkness, and this was also one of the reasons the Aztecs became a warrior race, as some battles were fought simply to capture more prisoners to sacrifice to this enduring battle.

> Tenochtitlán's Templo Mayor was decorated with skulls from past sacrifices arranged on racks called tzompantli

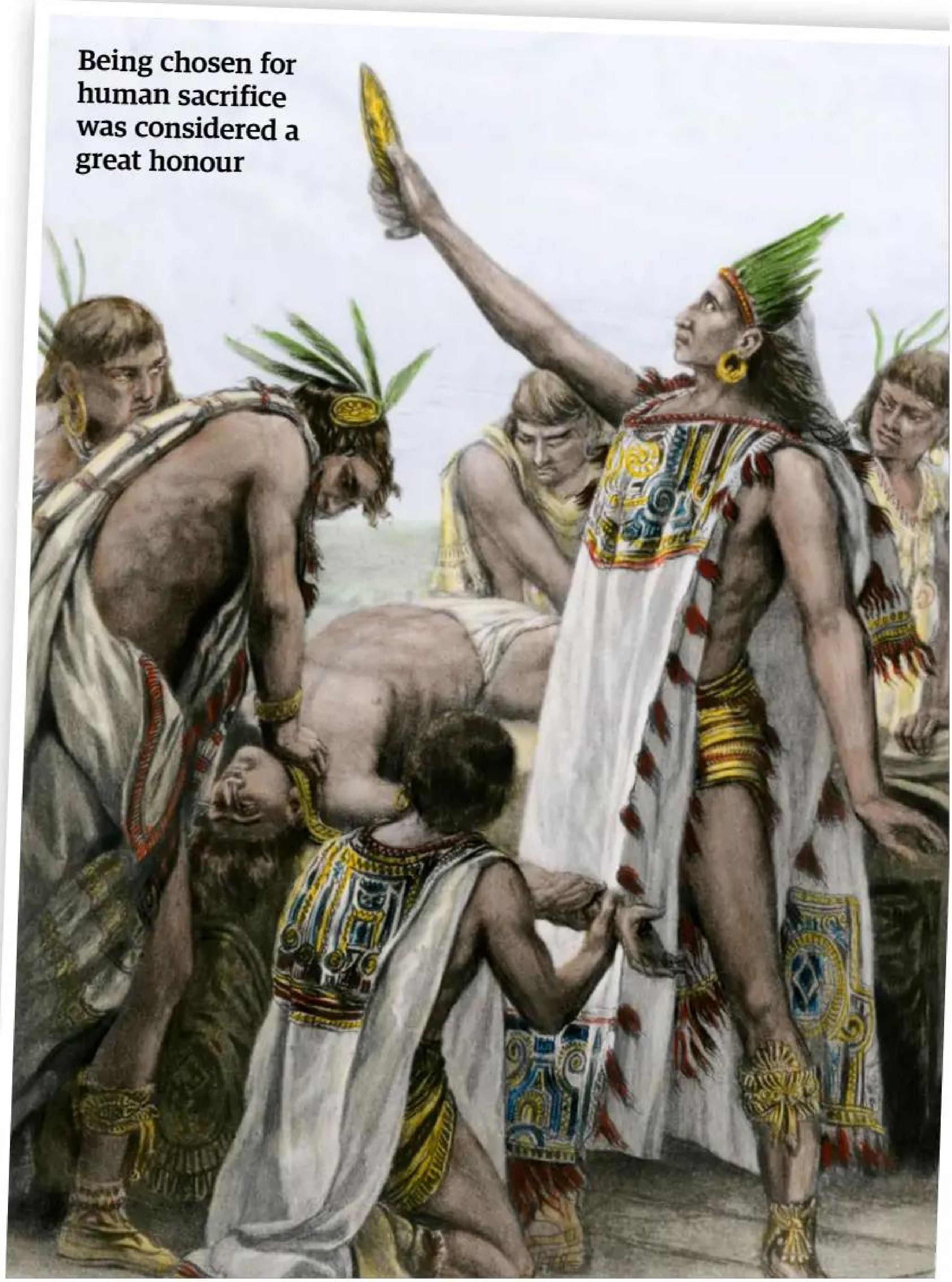
Priests played a vital role in Aztec society, as they ensured that the gods were presented with the right offerings and sacrifices were performed at the correct time. They were also responsible for conducting a huge variety of ceremonies to keep the gods satisfied. Because of their power and level of respect given to them, priests were often active in other influential roles, such as within the government or as teachers. In society they were treated as nobles.

However, the work of a priest was hard, and to become one took extensive training. Their mountain of never-ending responsibilities included: reading the calendar, keeping track of the time of day and eclipses, naming constellations, analysing horoscopes, tracking the movement of stars, recording events in glyphs and pictograms, going to war with warriors to hear confessions as well as training boys into the priesthood. It was a risky job, too – the latter responsibility would involve taking young trainees on nightly walks to hunt down dangerous creatures.

Some Aztec women also dedicated their lives to serving the gods by becoming priestesses. They worked equally as hard as the priests, performing ceremonies, songs, incantations and divinations. Some would also prepare potions and heal the sick with herbal remedies. They kept the temples clean and the fires burning. Priestesses also served an important role in society as matchmakers, marrying engaged couples.

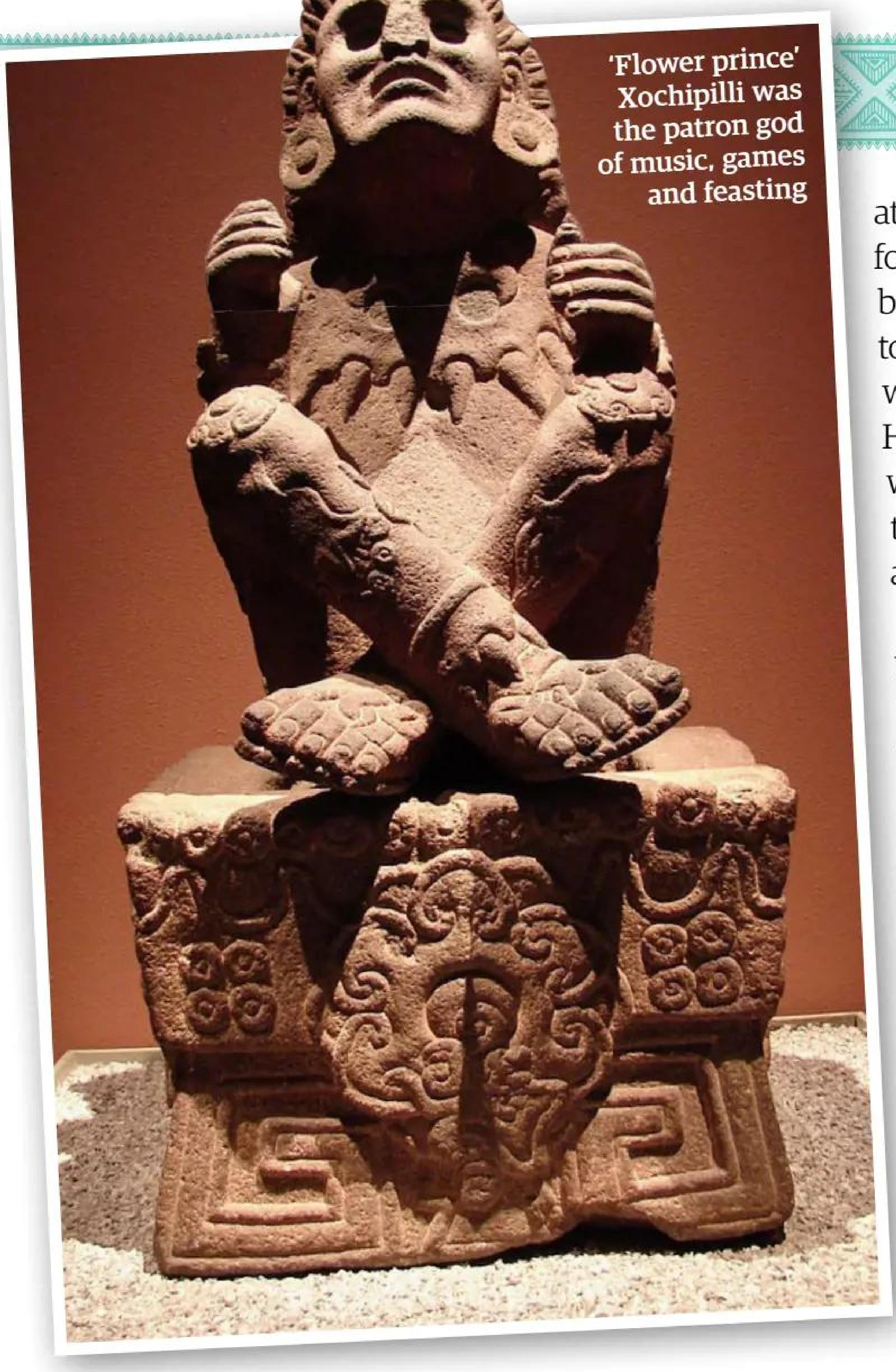
Religious ceremonies served a very important role in Aztec society, imbuing the peoples' lives with spiritual significance throughout the year. There were a huge number of ceremonies, with at least one major festival every single month. These ceremonies would honour the gods, and were usually aligned with the agricultural season. It was common for an individual to be chosen to be dressed as a god, and impersonate them throughout the ceremony. This person would be treated as if he or she *was* the god. The ceremonies had many different purposes – such as invoking fertility, celebrating the harvest, mountains, trade or hunting – but they often involved similar events, including fasting, then feasting, dressing in finery and dancing to music.

Of course many of the ceremonies often culminated in human sacrifice of some sort. Because of the importance and honour associated with the ritual, most Aztecs would go to their deaths by sacrifice willingly. However, some ceremonies did not involve human sacrifice at all,



Being chosen for human sacrifice was considered a great honour

> "The Aztecs believed that blood sacrifice would help fight the powers of darkness"



'Flower prince' Xochipilli was the patron god of music, games and feasting

and instead required only blood-letting by priests, or the sacrifice of birds and other creatures.

A popular festival was Tlacaxipehualiztli, a ceremony which honoured the god of vegetation, Xipe Totec, a highly venerated figure. The ritual required the sacrifice of captured warriors. The skin of the warrior was flayed after death, dyed yellow and dubbed 'golden clothes'. Other victims were strapped to frames and shot with arrows, allowing their blood to drip down to symbolise the fertile spring rains. The priests would wear these flayed human skins for all 20 days of the festival, which also featured gladiatorial combat and military ceremonies. The aim of the ceremony was to invoke rain and stave off drought.

A tradition known as the time of 'nemontemi' was observed at the end of every 360-day calendar year, an ominous five-day period to even out the 365 days of a solar year. Aztecs believed this to be a time of incredible bad luck, and nemontemi can be translated as the 'useless' or 'wasted' days. Aztecs tried to avoid misfortune by literally doing nothing. All tools were placed down and people stayed locked in their houses, barely eating anything, patiently waiting for the period to pass. This was taken so seriously that all other religious ceremonies were halted and businesses closed, it was even considered taboo to make love to a partner during this time as any activity would result in terrible consequences.

Another ceremony involving sacrifice was Toxcatl. Lasting for 17 days, the festival would feature feasting and dancing, but would culminate in the sacrifice of the god Tezcatlipoca. The deity would be represented by a young man who would have been impersonating him since the previous festival. Another new Tezcatlipoca would be picked at the end of each Toxcatl; the young men chosen for the role were usually captives of war, and would be trained in courtly speech, singing and how to play the lute. For his year of playing a god he would be paraded through the streets and revered. He would also be ritually wed to four young women portraying goddesses. After his sacrifice, the flesh would be eaten not only by nobles, but also by the next captive chosen to play the role.

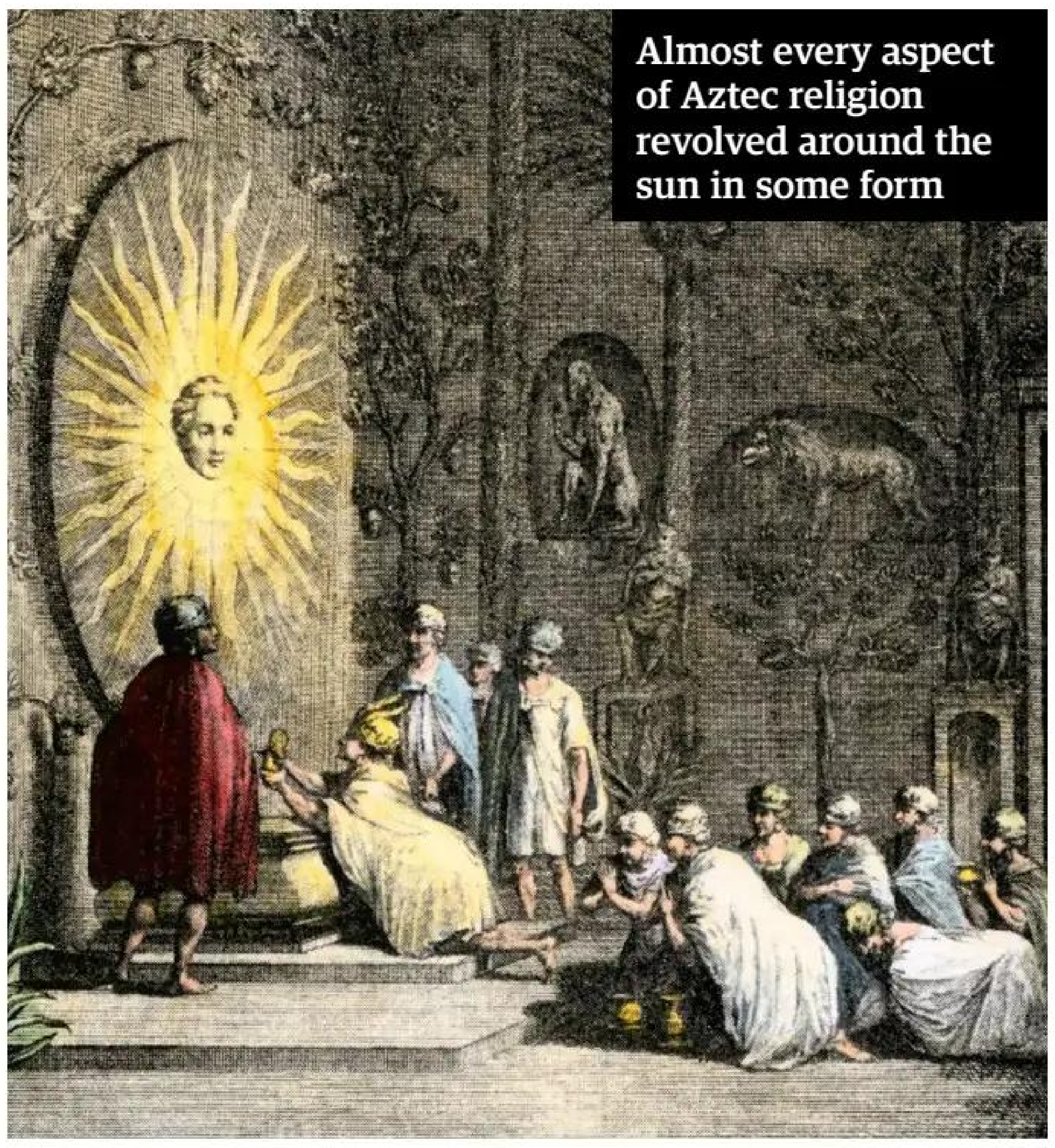
Just as religion was the centre of Aztec life, temples served as the center of their cities. There were also mountain temples or 'god houses', which were carved right into the side or at the top of sacred peaks. Sometimes whole areas of cities would be dedicated to religious activities, but the temples were the beating heart of Aztec life. Priests would use these temples to worship the gods, pray for their blessing and make offerings. These temples often took the form of step pyramids, with stairs leading up to a flat top, which usually housed a shrine to a particular god.

The Aztecs believed that the afterlife bestowed upon you was determined not by how you lived, but how you died. For example, those who died in battle, or were killed in ritual sacrifice would receive the highest honour of going on to lift up the sun each dawn. The souls would fulfil this role for four years, after which they would then be reincarnated as hummingbirds or butterflies. Merchants who were killed by enemies during trading expeditions were also believed to have been rewarded with this same fate.

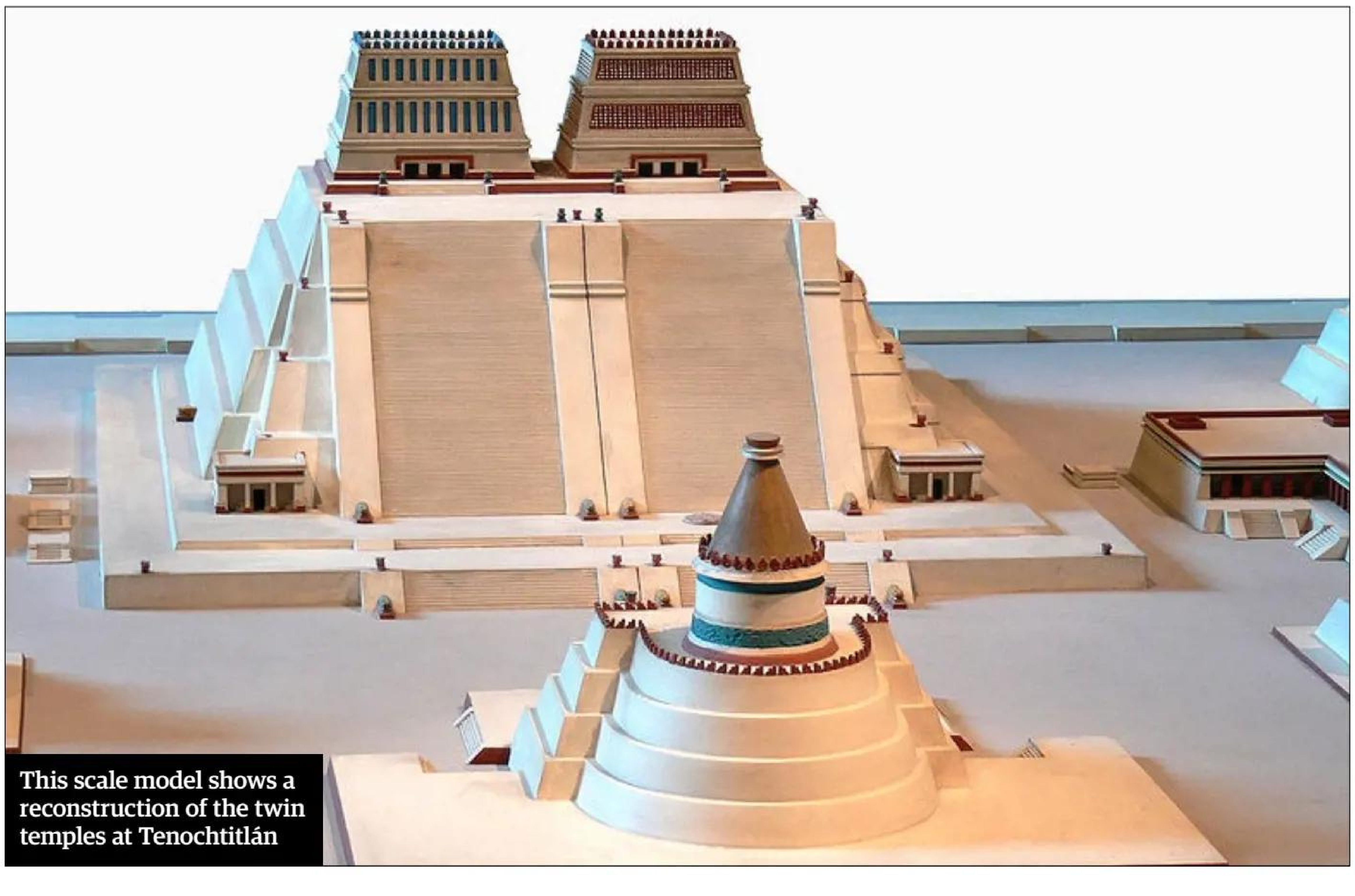
The very important role of taking down the sun at night was given to women who died in childbirth. In this way, the same level of respect was given to these women as soldiers killed in battle. Children who tragically died young would go to a heaven called Xochitlalpan, where they would lay beneath an 'udder tree' that dripped milk into their mouths.

Those unlucky enough to be struck by lightning or die by drowning (a relatively common occurrence) were sentenced to serve Tlaloc, the god of rain and storms. Their souls were sent to Tlalocan, a paradise filled with flowering plants. This fate was also given to those who died from diseases associated with the deity, as well as those who were physically deformed.

People who died ordinary deaths were fated to undertake a four-year journey to the deepest layer of the underworld to become servants to the god Mictlanteucuhtli, who ruled over the land of the dead alongside his wife, the goddess Mictecacíhuatl. It wasn't regarded as a punishment, but this journey was difficult and fraught with danger. The dead had to pass mountains which crashed into each other, a field where the wind blew knives and even a river filled with blood and jaguars. Their bodies would be buried or cremated together with a range of items thought to help them undertake this journey such as food, drink, clothes, tools and even gifts for the lord of the underworld.



Almost every aspect of Aztec religion revolved around the sun in some form



This scale model shows a reconstruction of the twin temples at Tenochtitlán

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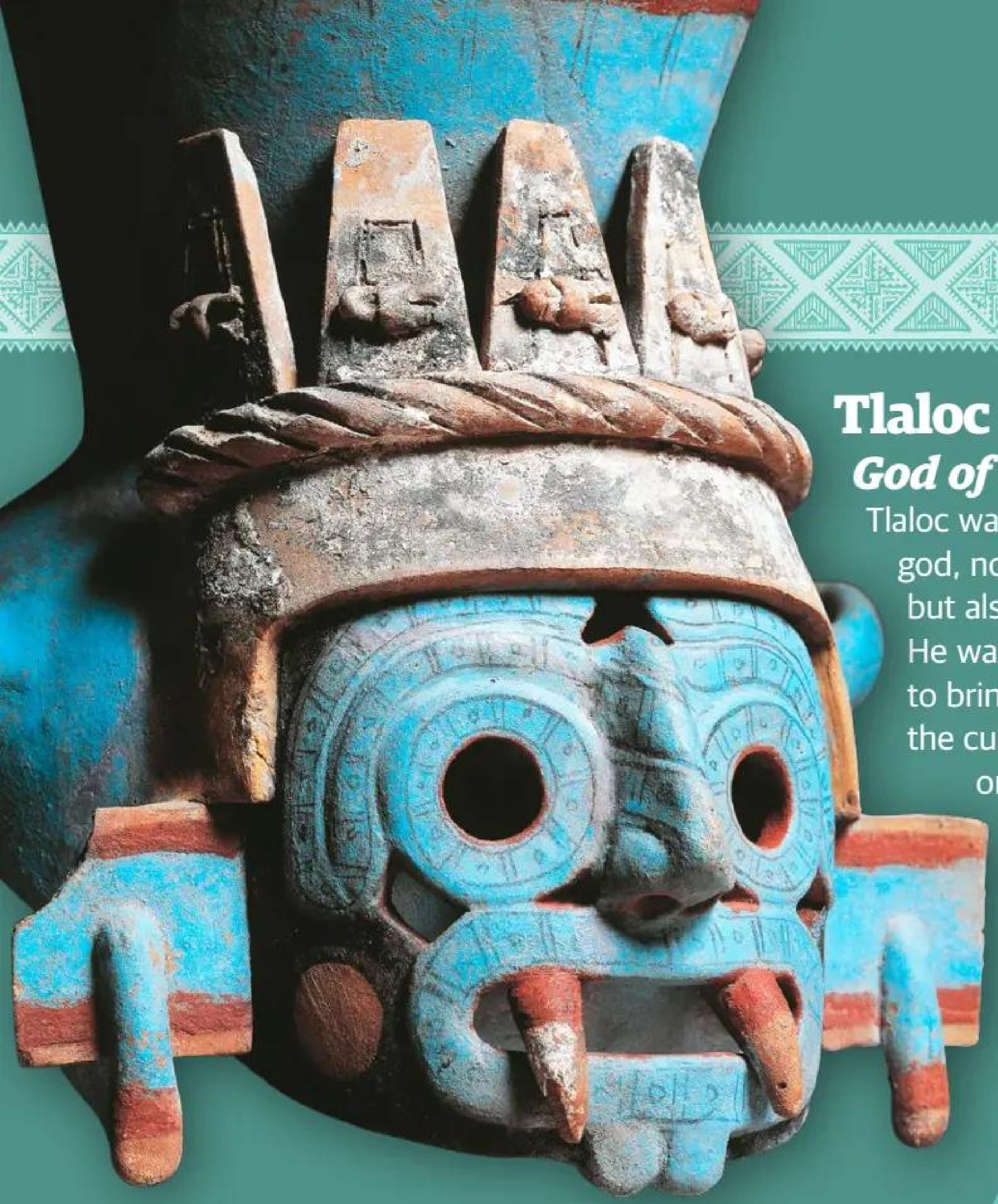
The Aztec pantheon

The Aztecs worshipped many different gods for different functions

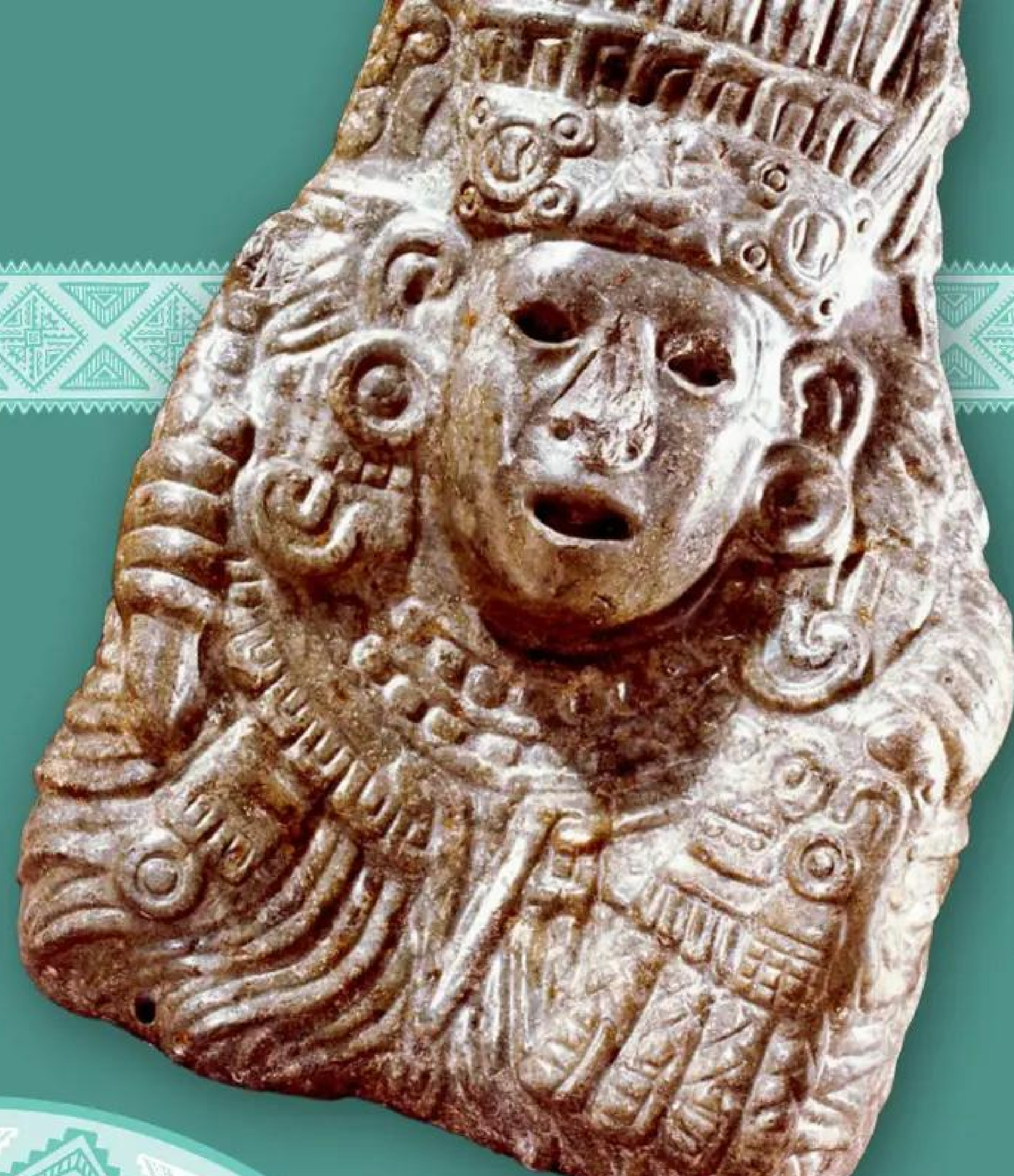
The Aztecs had a huge pantheon of gods, many of which were adopted and developed from different cultures. In general, the many Aztec gods were associated with culture, nature, creation, excess, maize, fertility, trade and death.



Tlaloc

God of Rain

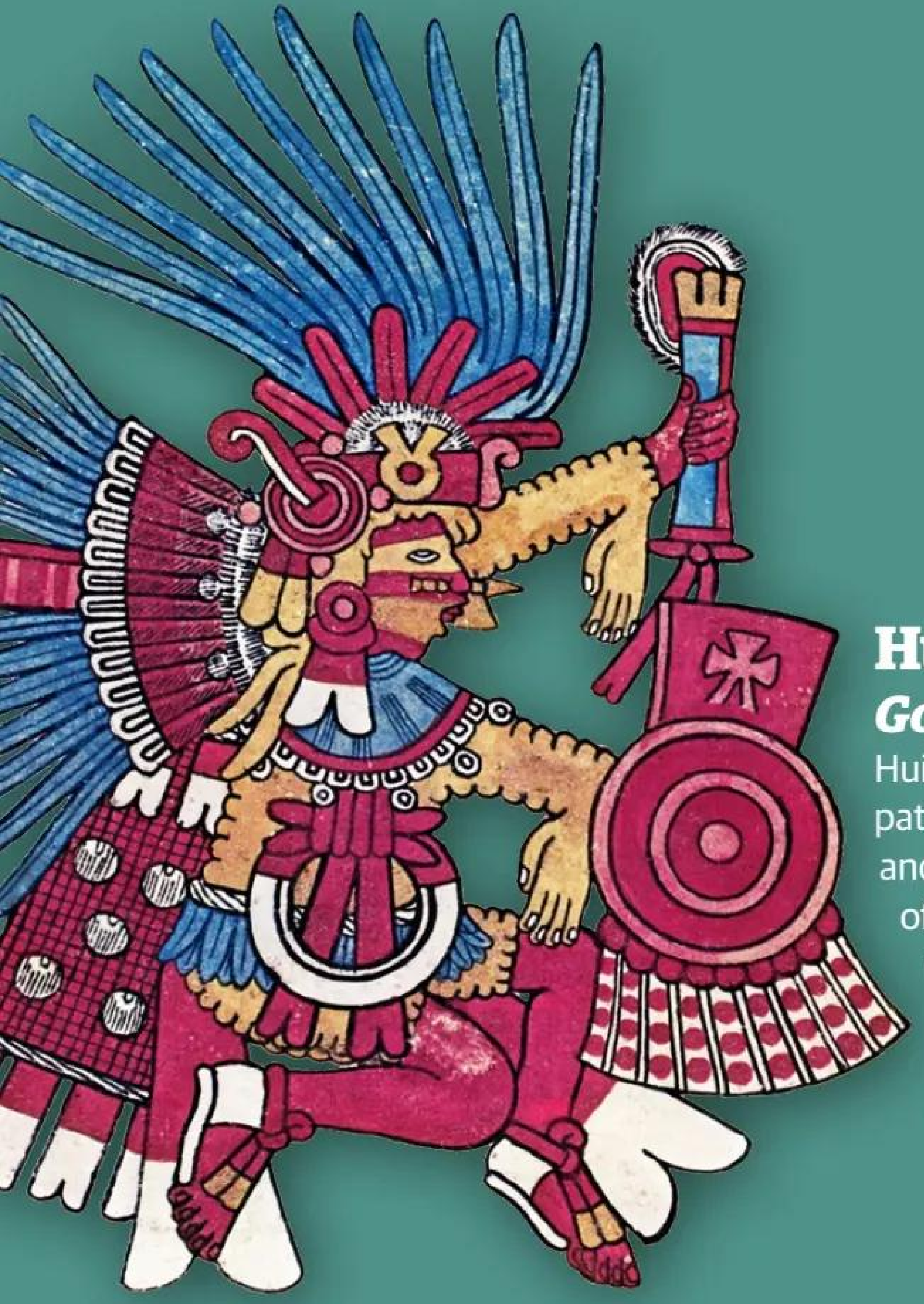
Tlaloc was a hugely important god, not only bringing rain, but also fertility and water. He was feared for his ability to bring thunderstorms, and the cult surrounding him was one of the oldest in all of ancient Mexico.



Quetzalcoatl

God of life, wind and learning

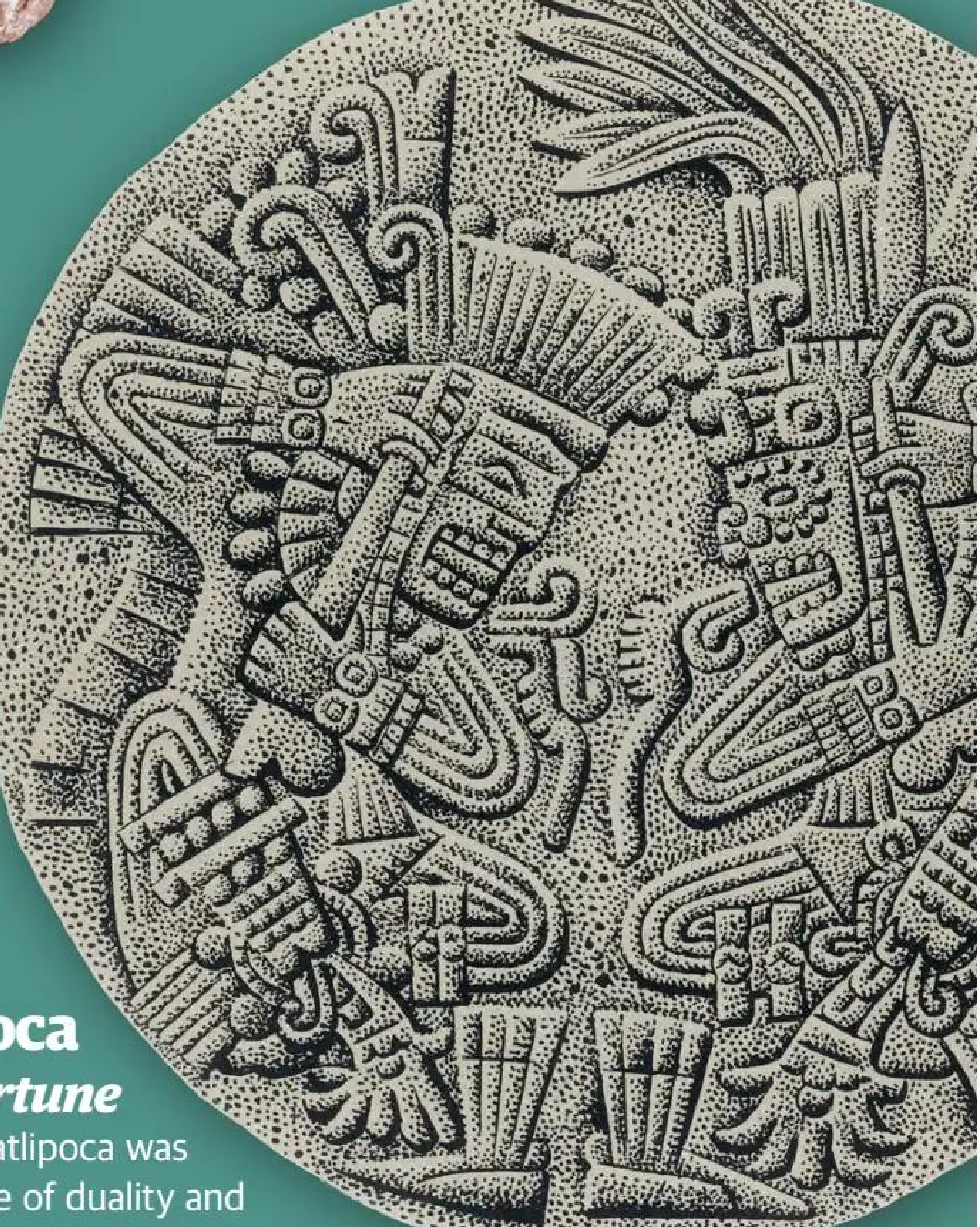
Known as the 'feathered serpent', Quetzalcoatl also was the patron god of the Aztec priests and was believed to take the form of the morning star (Venus).



Huitzilopochtli

God of the sun

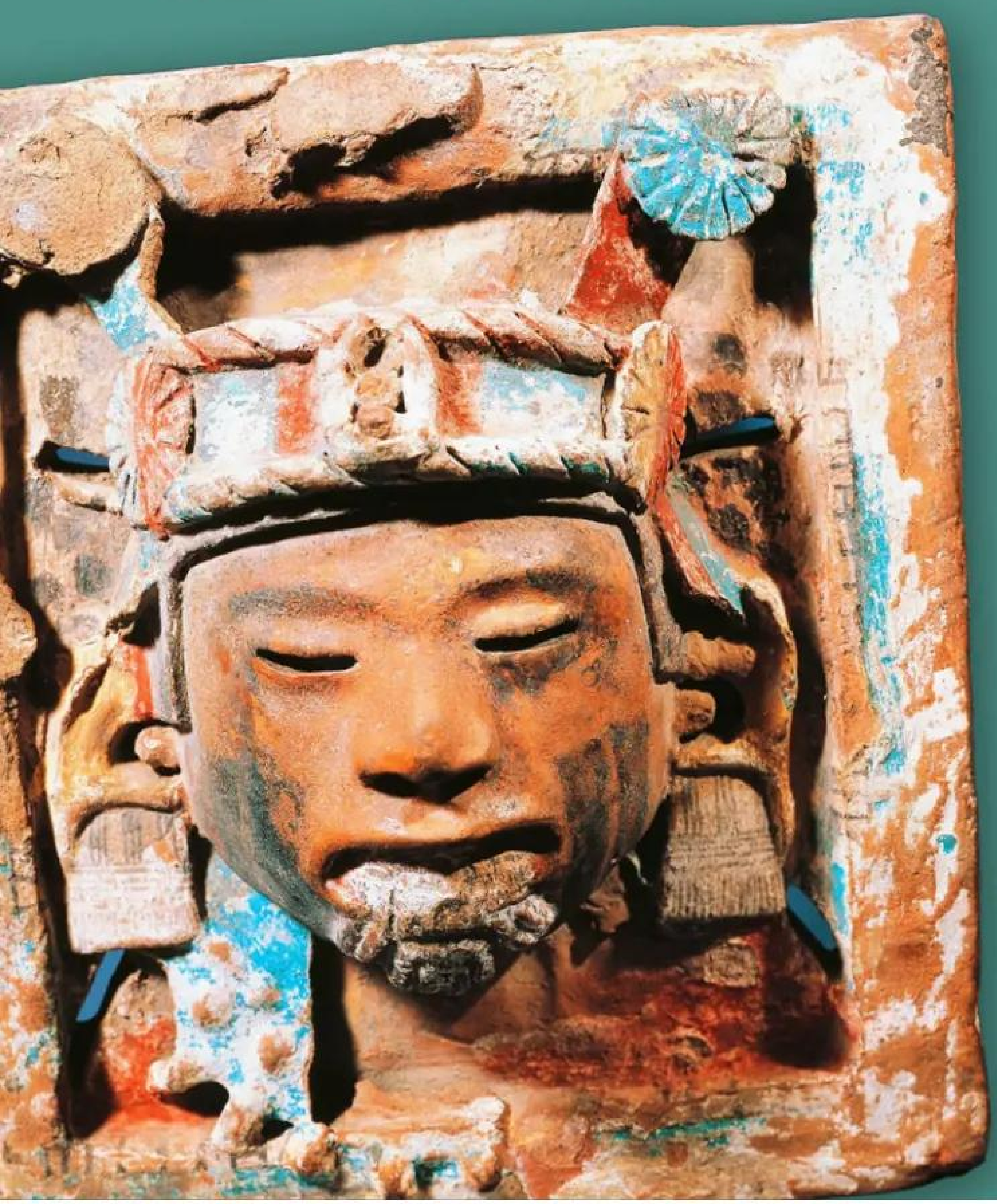
Huitzilopochtli was the patron god of the Aztecs, and also served as a deity of the sacred traditions of war and human sacrifice.



Tezcatlipoca

God of destiny and fortune

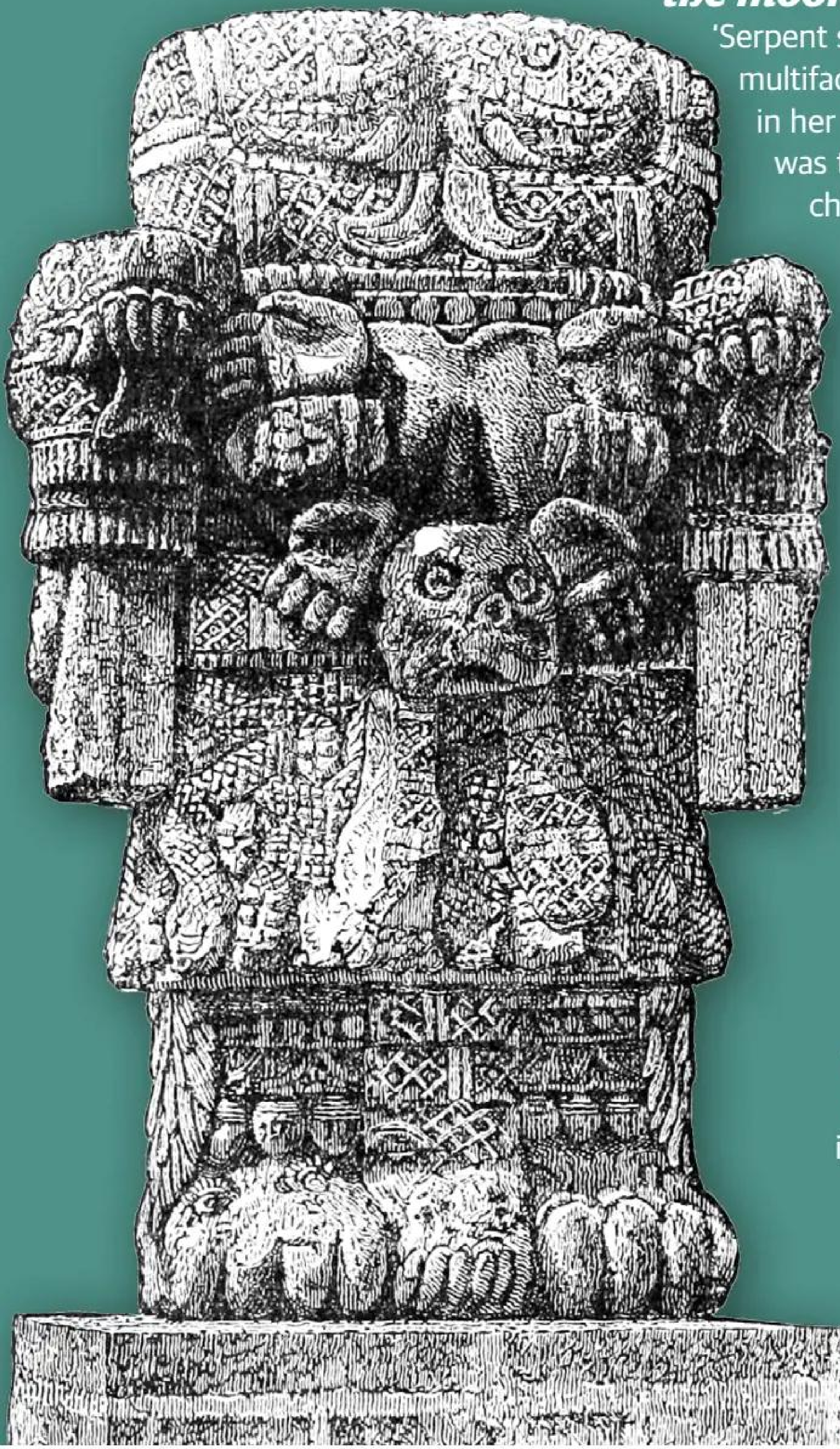
Translated as 'smoking mirror', Tezcatlipoca was an elusive and complicated figure of duality and was even referred to the 'enemy of both sides'.



Xipe Totec

God of fertility, spring and goldsmiths

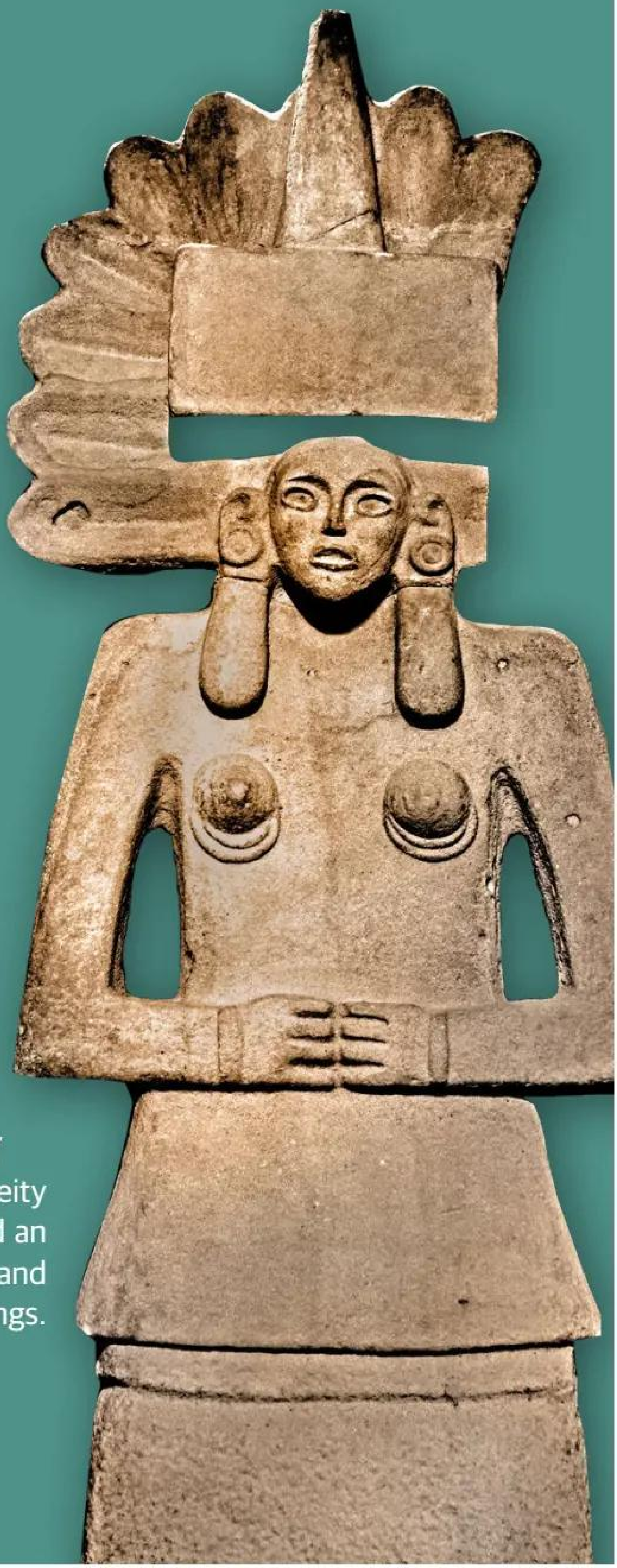
Known as 'our flayed lord' and 'the night drinker', this deity would flay himself to give food to humanity, and was also believed to have invented war.



Coatlicue

Mother of the gods, mortals, the sun, the moon and the stars

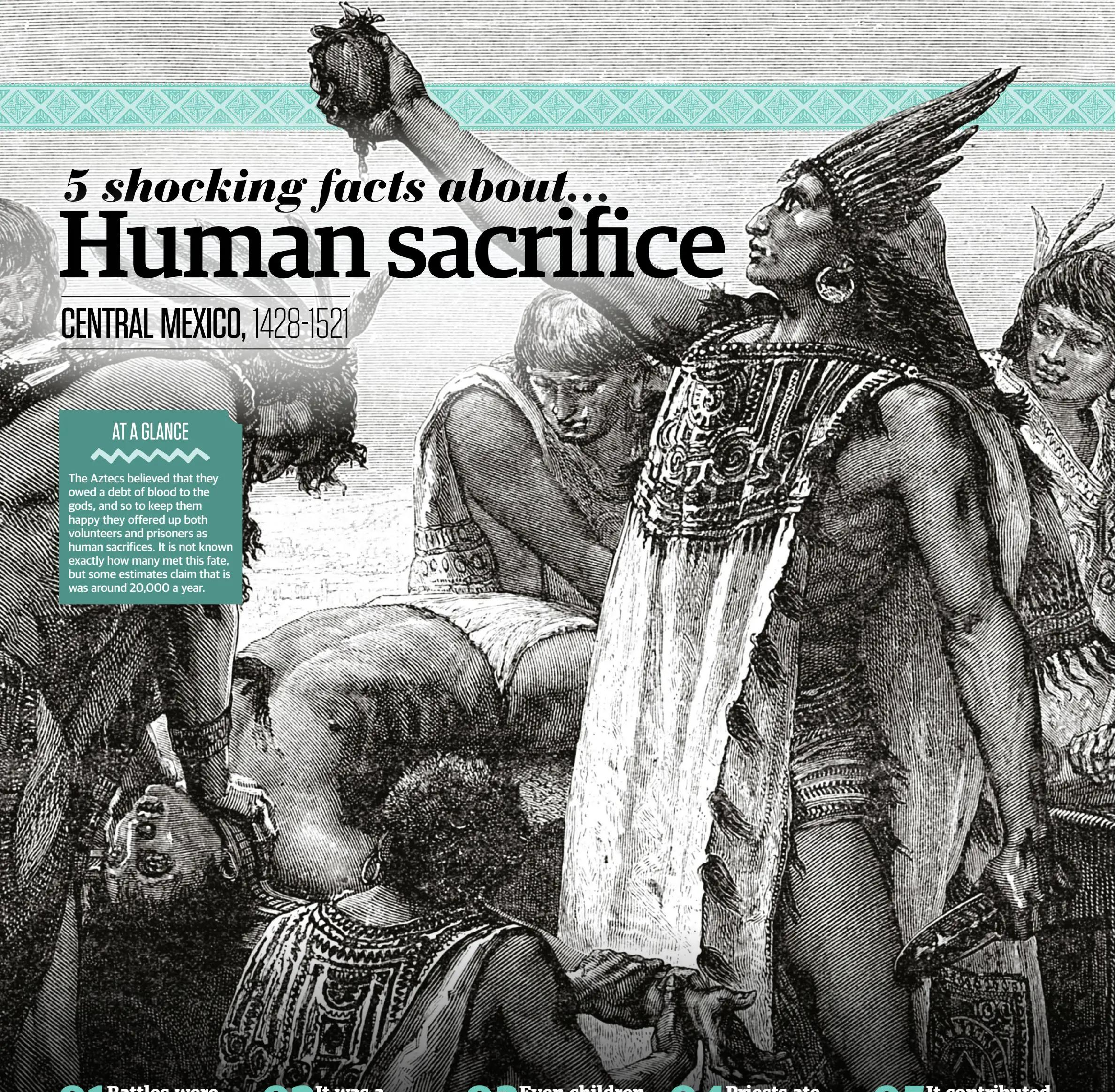
'Serpent skirt' Coatlicue's multifaceted role was reflected in her chimeric image. She was the patron goddess of childbirth and a symbol of the earth.



Tlazolteotl

Goddess of filth, guilt and cleansing

Tlazolteotl, despite being a deity of vice and adulterers, played an important role in purification and the confession of wrongdoings.



5 shocking facts about…

Human sacrifice

CENTRAL MEXICO, 1428-1521

AT A GLANCE

The Aztecs believed that they owed a debt of blood to the gods, and so to keep them happy they offered up both volunteers and prisoners as human sacrifices. It is not known exactly how many met this fate, but some estimates claim that is was around 20,000 a year.

01 Battles were staged to capture victims

To fulfil their quota of human sacrifices, the Aztecs struck a deal with their neighbours, the Tlaxcalans, who shared similar beliefs. Both sides agreed to engage in ritualistic battles called flower wars, in which noble warriors would face-off in close combat to secure the rights to prisoners who could then be sacrificed.

02 It was a bloody affair

The sacrifical victim would be taken to the top of a temple pyramid, where they would be laid down on a stone dais. A priest would then cut open their chest, pull out their still-beating heart and triumphantly hold it up to the gods, before kicking the limp, lifeless body down the temple pyramid's steps to be cut into pieces by the people.

03 Even children weren't safe

Tlaloc, the Aztec god of rain, demanded the tears and blood of children. As a result, a large number were sacrificed each year in order to prevent drought and the failed harvests it would bring. In addition, the birth of twins was seen as a mortal threat to the parents, and so one of the babies was usually killed and offered back to the gods.

04 Priests ate the remains

While the hearts were offered to the gods, the rest of the sacrificed bodies were not wasted. Their flesh was considered sacred, so was served to the emperor or priests. A corn soup called pozole was one such dish made with human thigh, but when cannibalism was banned by the Spanish, the flesh was swapped for pork.

05 It contributed to the fall of the empire

The widespread practice of human sacrifice by the Aztecs caused tensions with their neighbours. When the Spanish launched their conquest in 1519, the now warring city-state of Tlaxcala was motivated to join their fight, and the severely diminished Aztec population failed to defeat them.

© Alamy

At Home With
The Aztecs

Between the battles and sacrifices, normal Aztec people thrived in a community that prioritised family, education and discipline

Written by Frances White

When one thinks of the Aztecs, often the first things that come to mind are cities teeming with gold, an efficient warrior race, and even religious ceremonies that involve human sacrifices. However, Aztecs were also highly focused on their societies. Religion was prevalent because it helped bind the community together, and every aspect of daily life was focused on the benefits of the community. Unusually for a civilisation of this era, the Aztecs had mandatory education for all children, which meant they were able to provide professional, accomplished personnel for a range of occupations and roles. A law-abiding society, every aspect of daily life was dominated by rules and regulations to be followed by all – even the nobility. Despite the fact that the Aztecs existed 500 years ago, their daily life and family units were remarkably similar to those that exist in many cultures today.

> Aztec men generally got married between the ages of 20 and 22, but Aztec women married as teenagers, aged 15 to 18

The Aztecs, like many cultures of the era, had a strict social system, and where people fell on it would define almost every aspect of their lives: The noble class were known as the pipiltin and they would typically be employed in the army, government or priesthood, and they also comprised the city council. The tlatoani (king) himself was sometimes picked from the pipiltin. Certain Aztec merchants comprised a class of their own – the pochteca. Though not noble-born, they were treated like nobility because of the importance of their jobs, where they would travel long distances to obtain luxury goods the nobility adored. The average Aztec citizen was part of a group called the macehualtin. This group would be employed as farmers and craftsmen. The lowest rung of society comprised of slaves. Slaves would not be born into it, and the children of slaves were not regarded as slaves. People would instead fall into slavery as either a punishment for breaking the law, or by selling themselves into it due to debt. They could also buy their freedom and held rights that protected them against mistreatment. There was some movement up the societal pyramid, and the most common paths upwards were through the military, trade and priesthood.

The family unit was a hugely important focus of the Aztec society and, because of this, marriage was regarded as very sacred. Upper-class marriages were arranged by matchmakers and the newlyweds would have no say in the matter. The lower classes had an unusual advantage whereby their marriages would be arranged by their parents, but they would have the right to say no. A woman would only have one husband, though he could

The marketplace was the hub of the community, teeming with life and trade

Crime and punishment

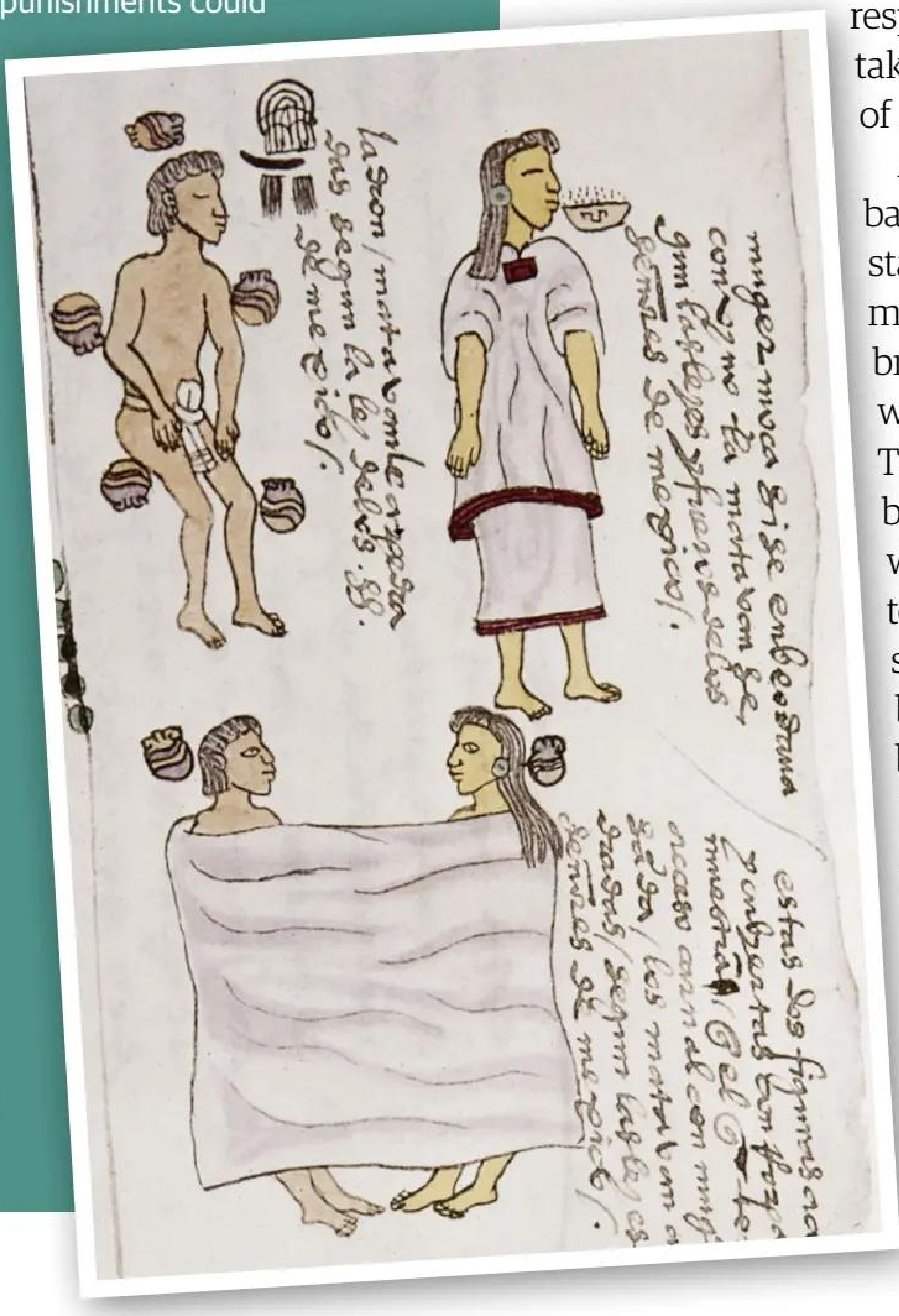
With no prison system, punishment was swift and severe

Laws governed every aspect of Aztec life and, surprisingly in a god-fearing society, these rules were more often than not based on practicality, not religion. Crime and punishment would vary from city to city, as although they shared a common emperor, the cities were, for all intents and purposes, self-ruling.

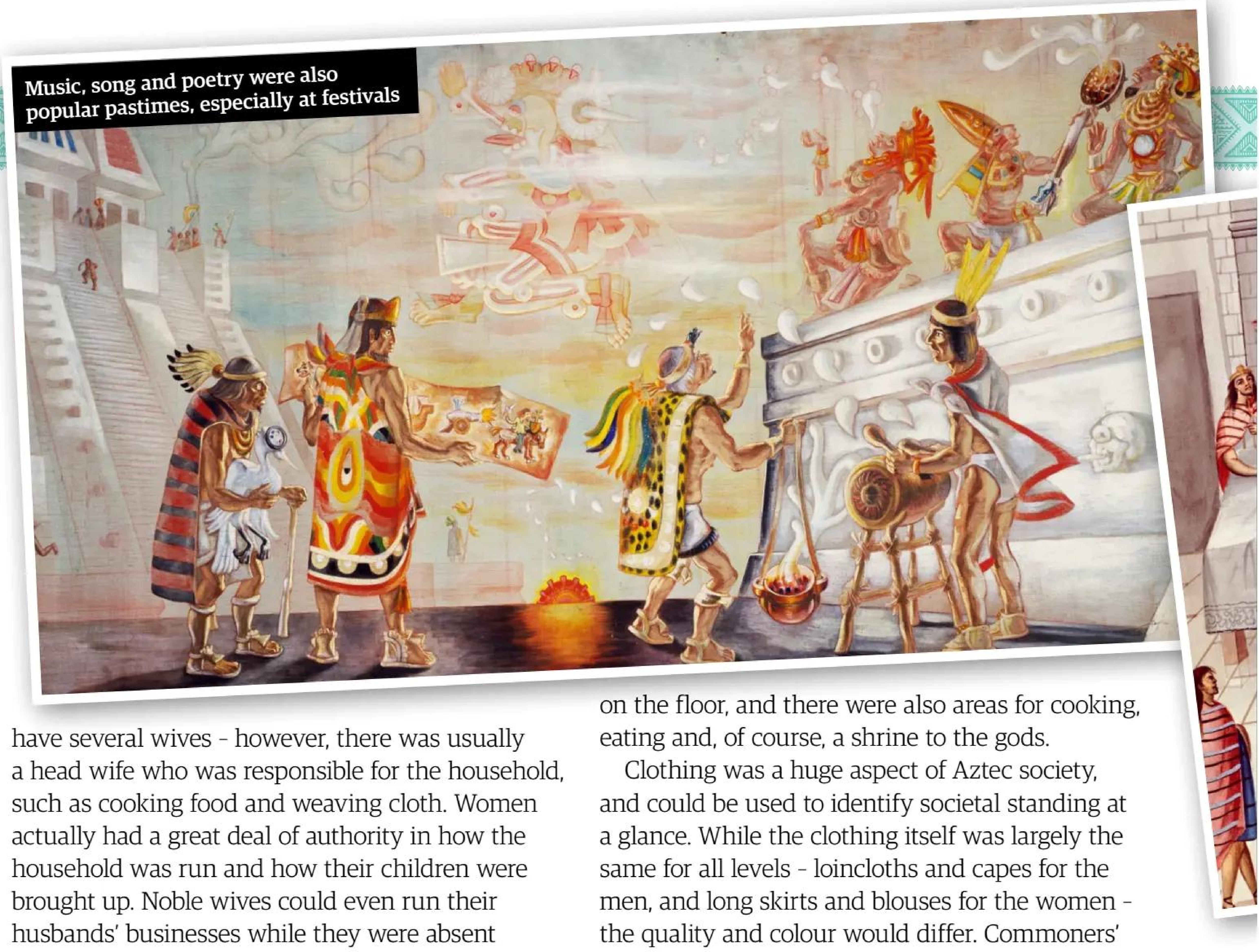
It is difficult to estimate just how much crime there was in the Aztec Empire, and this is because it was dealt with so quickly and efficiently. There were no prisons, so the system had to be swift and orderly when it came to handing out judgements and punishments. Some of the most serious crimes were murder, stealing crops or public drunkenness (except at a festival – and those over 70 years old were allowed to be drunk to their hearts' content).

Crimes would be dealt with at local courts, presided over by senior warriors. More complex, serious crimes would be tried in the city of Tenochtitlán, in the teccalco court, where more experienced judges would pass sentences. The most complex cases, involving nobles, would be heard at the high court in the emperor's palace itself, sometimes with the emperor acting as judge. If citizens were displeased with their verdict, they could appeal rulings to a higher court, much like today's judicial system.

Without any prisons to send criminals to, and no torture, often the death penalty was given for crimes. This took various forms – from being stoned on the spot, taken to an altar, or strangled. Nobles were actually often given harsher punishments than the commoners, as they were expected to set an example. If it was your first offence, or you had committed a minor crime, lighter punishments could be given, such as having your head shaved or home demolished. For crimes that involved money or stealing, the criminal was expected to give the goods back, or pay the medical expenses after a fight. If one was not able to, slavery would often be used to pay back what was owed. However, even minor stealing offences could result in the death penalty.



This depicts a girl executed for drunkenness, a boy stoned for stealing, and couple killed for adultery



Music, song and poetry were also popular pastimes, especially at festivals

have several wives – however, there was usually a head wife who was responsible for the household, such as cooking food and weaving cloth. Women actually had a great deal of authority in how the household was run and how their children were brought up. Noble wives could even run their husbands' businesses while they were absent at war. Wives were also able to divorce their husbands, and the goods owned by the couple would be split between them.

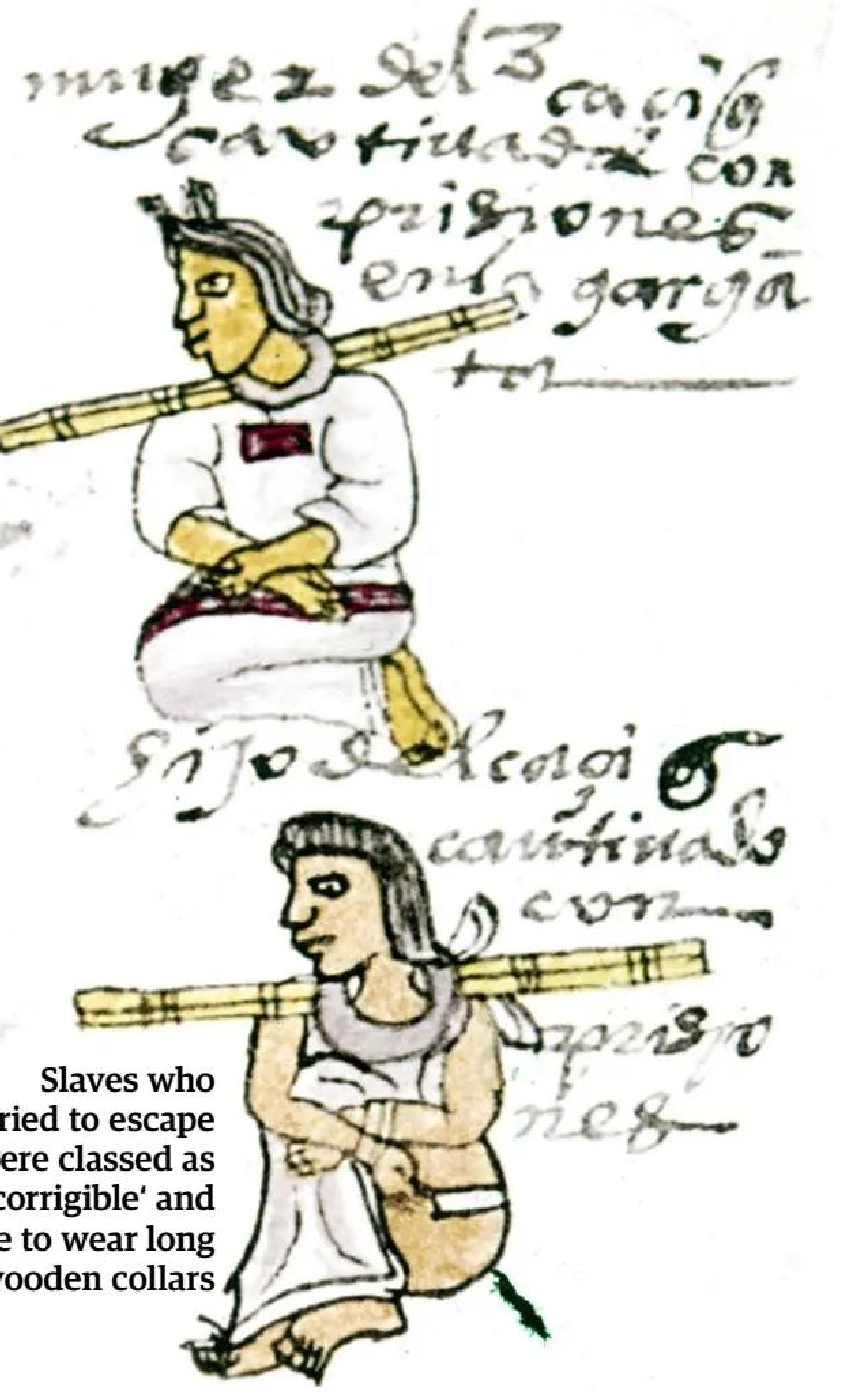
Families often lived in joint households, combining multiple family units into one, for example two brothers and their families. All members of the household would help in its upkeep, including children, while also working to create goods for trade. Cotton was a hugely important crop, and household production of cotton textiles was common. Cotton was, in ways, the great unifier of Aztec society; women from the lowest rungs to the most esteemed nobles would spin and weave cotton. Cotton would even be used as a form of currency for trade in marketplaces. The elderly members of the family were highly respected, and were well taken care of in all branches of Aztec society.

Aztec homes differed based on their owners' social standings. Noble homes were made of stone or sun-dried brick and coated in white wash, which sparkled in the sun. Their houses boasted separate bathing rooms where water was poured over hot stones to create steam, similar to saunas. Nobles' homes could be two storeys tall and were built close to pools to ensure a constant supply of clean, fresh water.

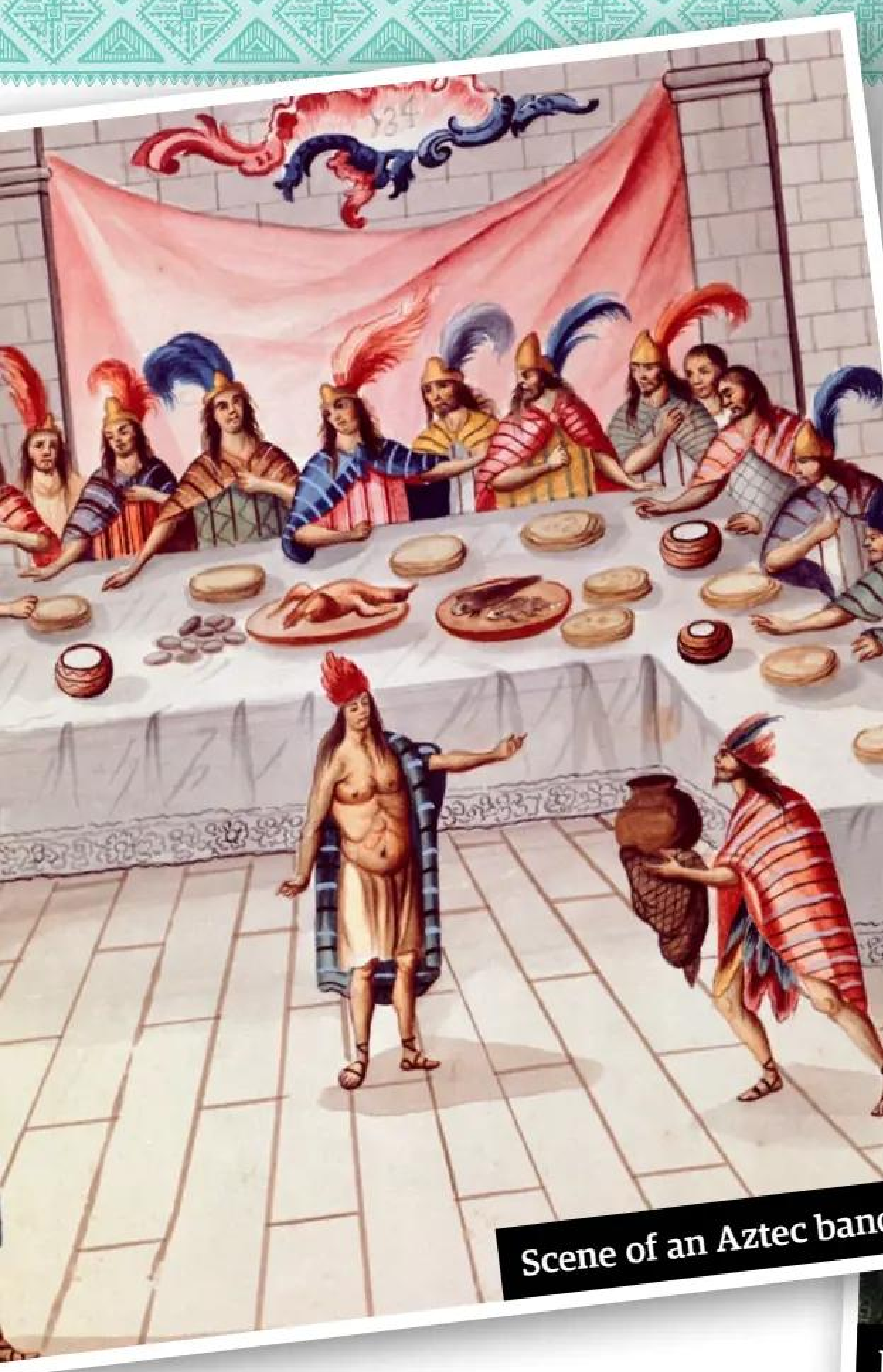
The common people would live in small huts thatched with palm leaves. They comprised of one or two rooms and also had a garden to grow crops. Sleeping quarters comprised of mats on the floor, and there were also areas for cooking, eating and, of course, a shrine to the gods.

Clothing was a huge aspect of Aztec society, and could be used to identify societal standing at a glance. While the clothing itself was largely the same for all levels – loincloths and capes for the men, and long skirts and blouses for the women – the quality and colour would differ. Commoners' clothes in general were woven from more coarse fibres, while the nobles' garments would be made of cotton and adorned with ornaments like earspools and pendants. The wealthy would wear colourfully embroidered clothes, and, most notably, their clothes would be decorated with feathers. They also carried fans made of feathers. Feathers were a major sign of status and only nobles were allowed to wear them. If commoners broke this law, and dared to wear a feather, they would be killed. While Spanish conquistadors longed for the Aztecs' gold, to the Aztecs, feathers were the ultimate luxury.

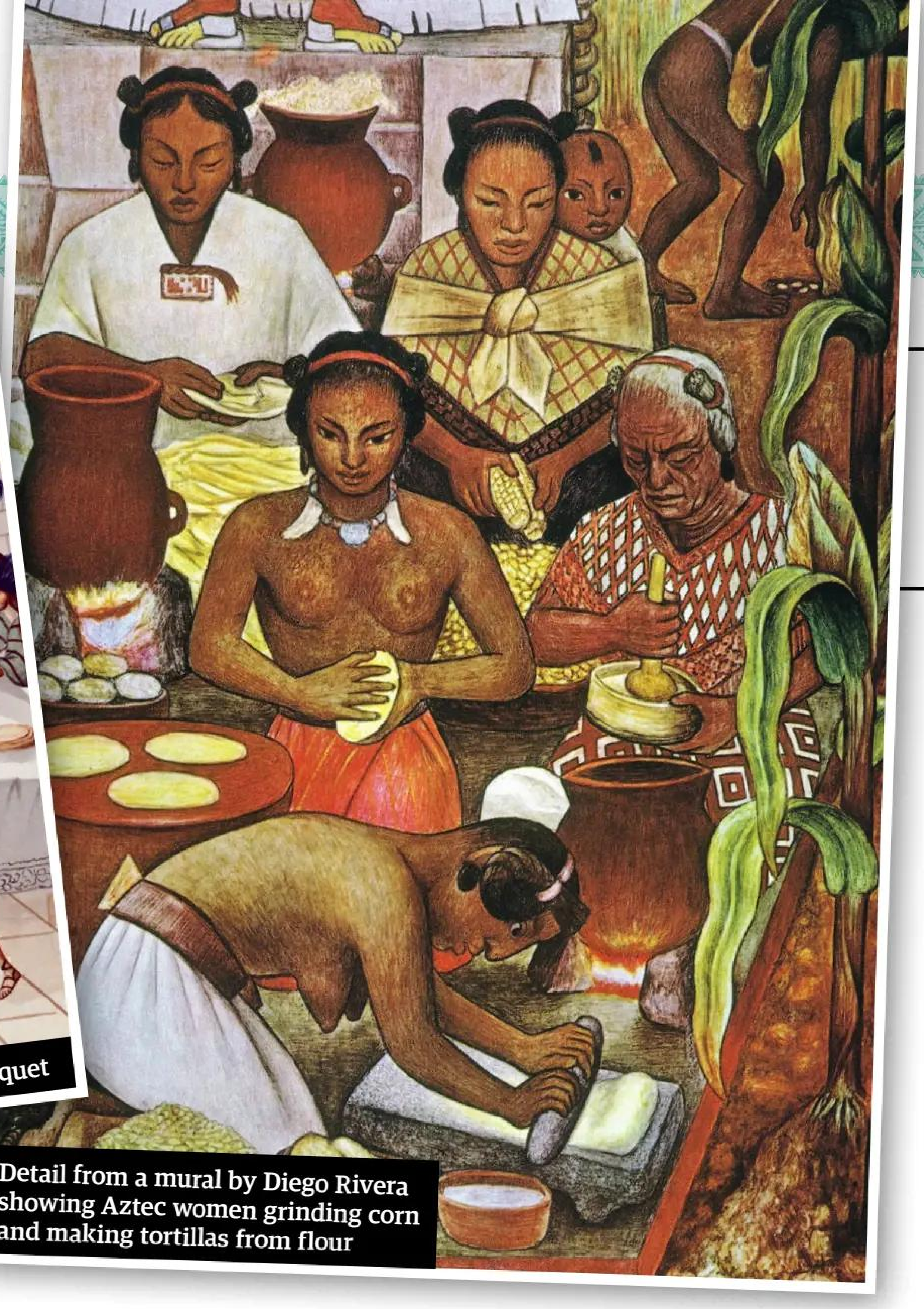
Children were beloved in Aztec society and regarded as 'gifts from the gods'. It wasn't unusual for celebrations after the birth of a healthy child to last for days. An infant's link to the gods


muger del cacique castigada con prisiones en la garganta
hijo del cacique castigado con prisiones

Slaves who tried to escape were classed as 'incorrigible' and made to wear long wooden collars



Scene of an Aztec banquet



Detail from a mural by Diego Rivera showing Aztec women grinding corn and making tortillas from flour

remained throughout their entire breastfeeding period, and they could not be punished or told off during this time.

Life was not so easy for children once they began to grow up, however. From the age of four, they would help with household tasks like cleaning and fetching water. Parents were expected to strictly discipline their children, and punishments could be severe. Good manners were prized, and children were expected to only speak when spoken to, to eat and drink slowly, to not leave any leftovers and to wash after eating. Children were strictly ordered never to complain, never to make fun of the old or sick and never interrupt. All children were expected to be fine examples of the community. Being lazy or slacking could result in the child having their head singed and shaved.

Another key part of growing up as an Aztec was education. Children were generally educated at home until their teenage years, then all children, regardless of social class or gender, would attend school by law. However, there were separate schools for different classes and genders – girls would usually learn about religion, such as ritual songs and dancing, as well as the skills that would make them a good head of the household, such as cooking and making clothing. Boys, meanwhile, would learn how to farm, or a craft like pottery. They would also receive religious and fighting training. The sons of nobles would be taught in other areas, setting them up for their future careers, such as writing, law and engineering. Generally, the nobles' schools were actually far stricter and much tougher for the students there.

Aztecs didn't have a lot of free time between all their hard work maintaining their families and household, but they did enjoy playing games. Patolli was a popular game of the time, and involved moving pieces around a cross-shaped board by rolling dice. A more energetic pastime was the famous Aztec ball game ullamaliztli, where players would pass a rubber ball around a court. A less well-known sport – but still very popular with the Aztecs – was Volador (its Spanish name). Known as the 'flying bird game', players wore costumes to make them look like birds. They would climb a 90-foot-high pole, tie a rope to the top of it, then push off and swing upside down around the pole 13 times. It is thought 13 represented the number of weeks in each season, and the number of voladors represented the four seasons. Points were awarded based on style, speed and costume design. The best flying bird would win. People would gather to watch the athletes 'fly' overhead. You can still watch specially trained Mexican acrobats performing Volador today.

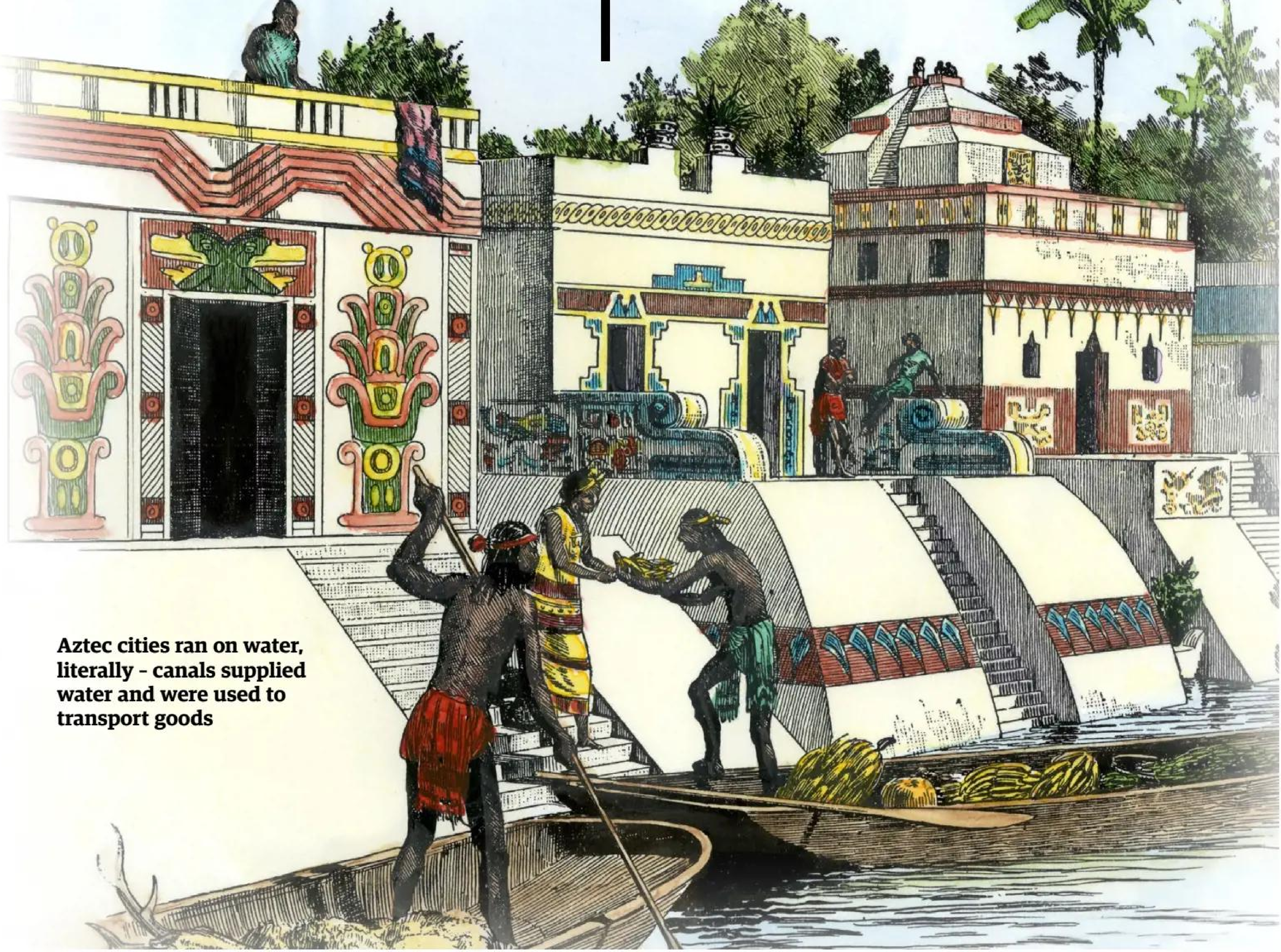
"Children were beloved in Aztec society"

Cleanliness is next to godliness

The Aztecs kept their bodies – and souls – clean in order to please the gods

Something that may surprise people is that the Aztecs were obsessed with their cleanliness. Staying clean and fresh formed a very important part of daily life, and this extended to their cities, too. Every day 1,000 men would clean and sweep the streets. Public toilets were built in every neighbourhood, garbage buried or dumped at the edge of town, and human waste transported in canoes to be used as fertiliser. The Aztecs were leaps and bounds ahead of their counterparts in Europe, where chamber pots were emptied into the streets and bathing was rare.

When the conquistadors met the Aztecs they were amazed by their personal hygiene and they fact they bathed multiple times a day. They didn't have soap, but would use the fruit of the copalxoctl tree and the root of the xiuhamolli plant to wash their bodies and clothes. The Aztecs would also use deodorants, breath-fresheners and toothpastes at a time when the Spaniards were still cleaning their teeth with urine. Aztecs used lakes and pools for washing, and also hot-houses heated by external fires. Bathers would make themselves perspire by thrashing themselves with twigs and grasses. Bathing, it was believed, cleansed the body and spirit, and was crucial to overall wellbeing.



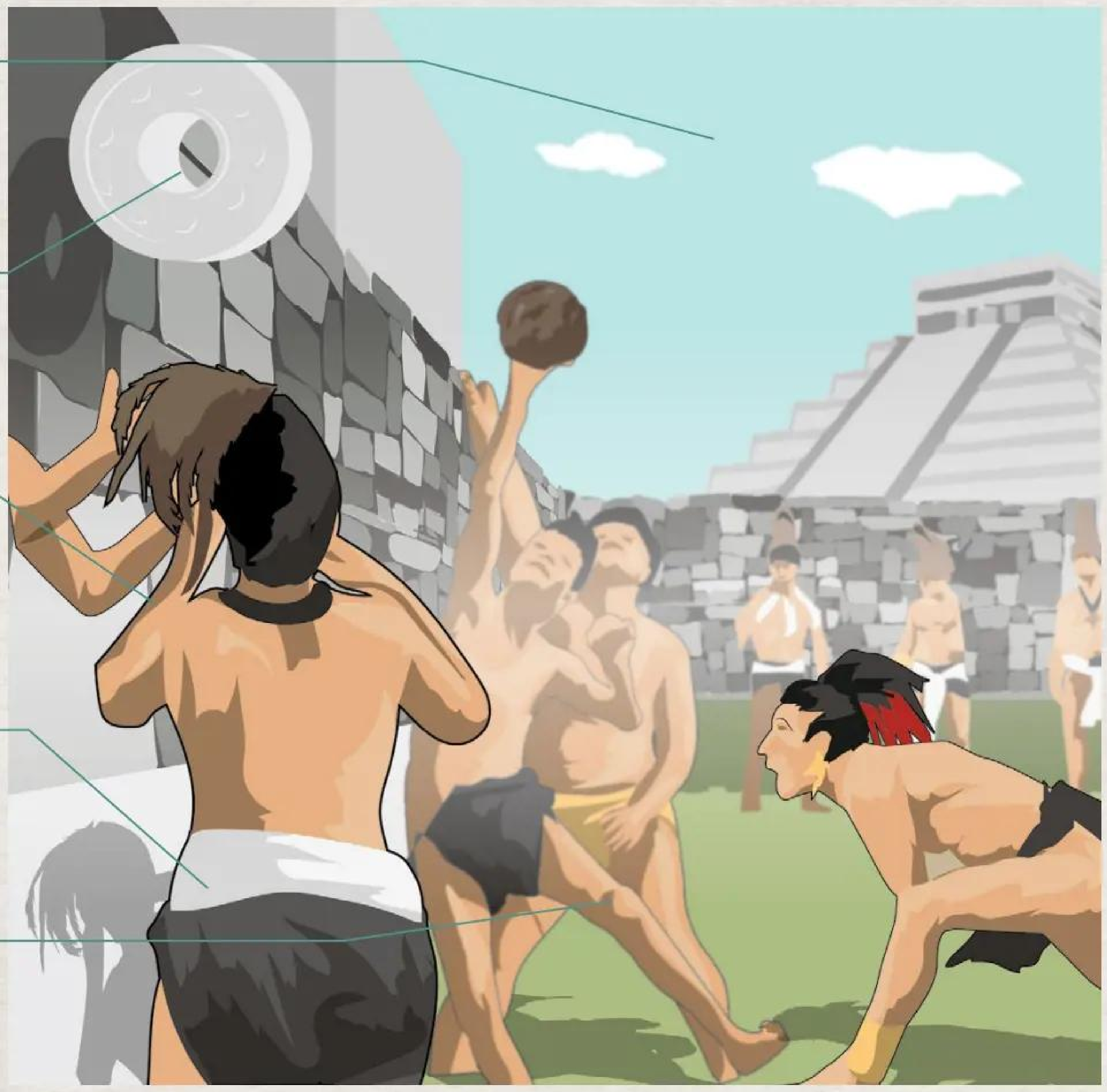
Aztec cities ran on water, literally – canals supplied water and were used to transport goods

© Alamy, Getty Images, Creative Commons; Joe Ravi

How to Play a game of Tlachtli

THE GREAT MESOAMERICAN PAST TIME WAS A BRUTAL BALL GAME THAT OFTEN ENDED WITH THE LOSING TEAM BEING SACRIFICED TO THE GODS CENTRAL AMERICA, 1200 BCE - 1521

Tlachtli, as the Aztecs called it, is the world's oldest known team sport. It was first played by the Olmec civilisation, which thrived between 1200 BCE and 400 BCE, before being passed down to the Maya and Aztec people. Tlachtli was played by teams of two to four, who hit the ball back and forth across a central line, similar to netball. But the ball could only be passed between players using their knees, elbows, or hips – never the hands or feet. A fast-paced and high-impact sport, the stakes were very high as the losing team were sometimes beheaded.



Religious significance

As sun worshippers, the ball game was played to mimic the battle of the sun against the moon and stars.

Slam-dunk

The aim of the game was to keep the ball moving over a line, but the Maya added the hoop for extra scoring points.

Contact sport

Playing on a stone-floored court, scrapes and bruises were common. If the rubber ball hit unprotected body parts, it could cause internal bleeding.

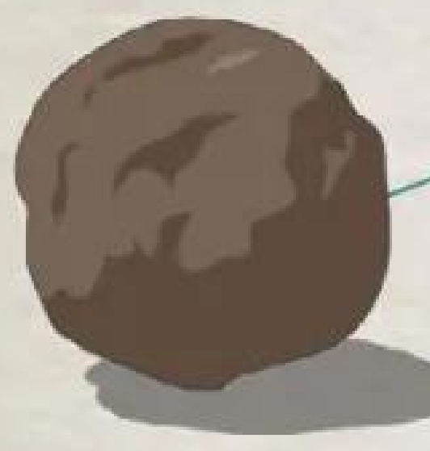
Protective clothing

Players wore padded belts known as 'yokes' as well as kneepads and arm coverings to protect themselves.

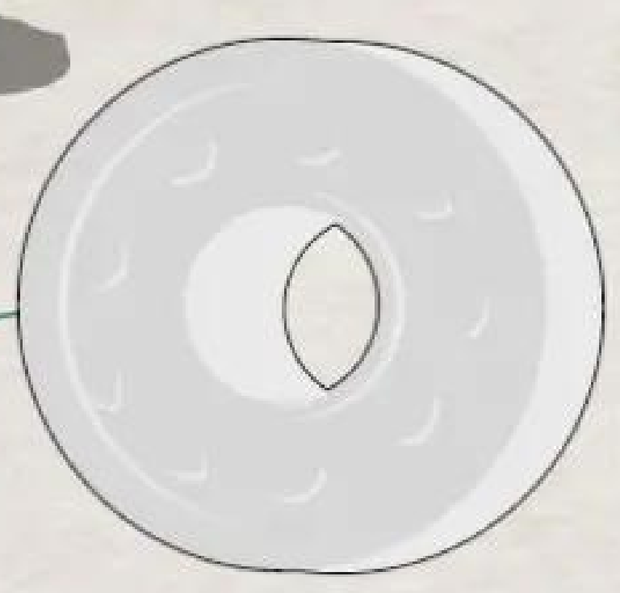
Sacred court

The court was a special place. In the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán, there was a court in the sacred precinct with the great temple.

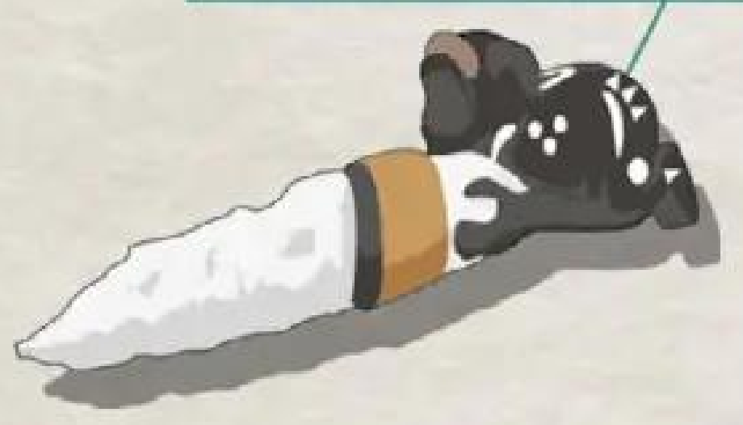
WHAT YOU'LL NEED...



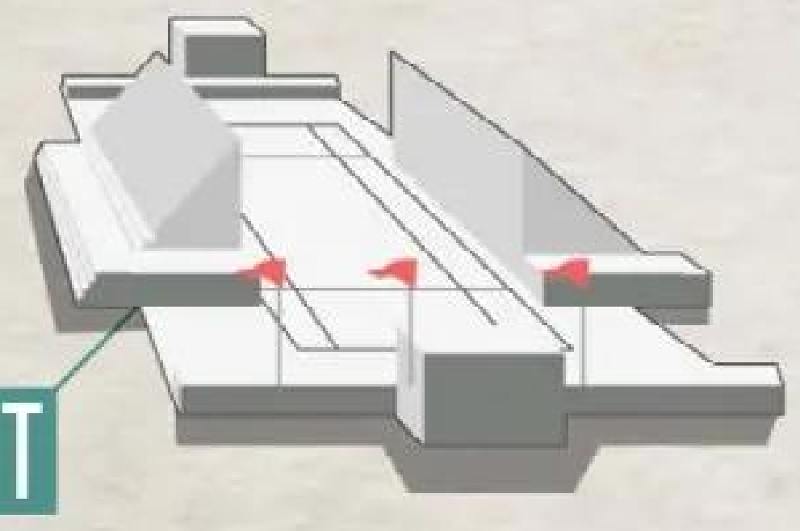
BALL



HOOP

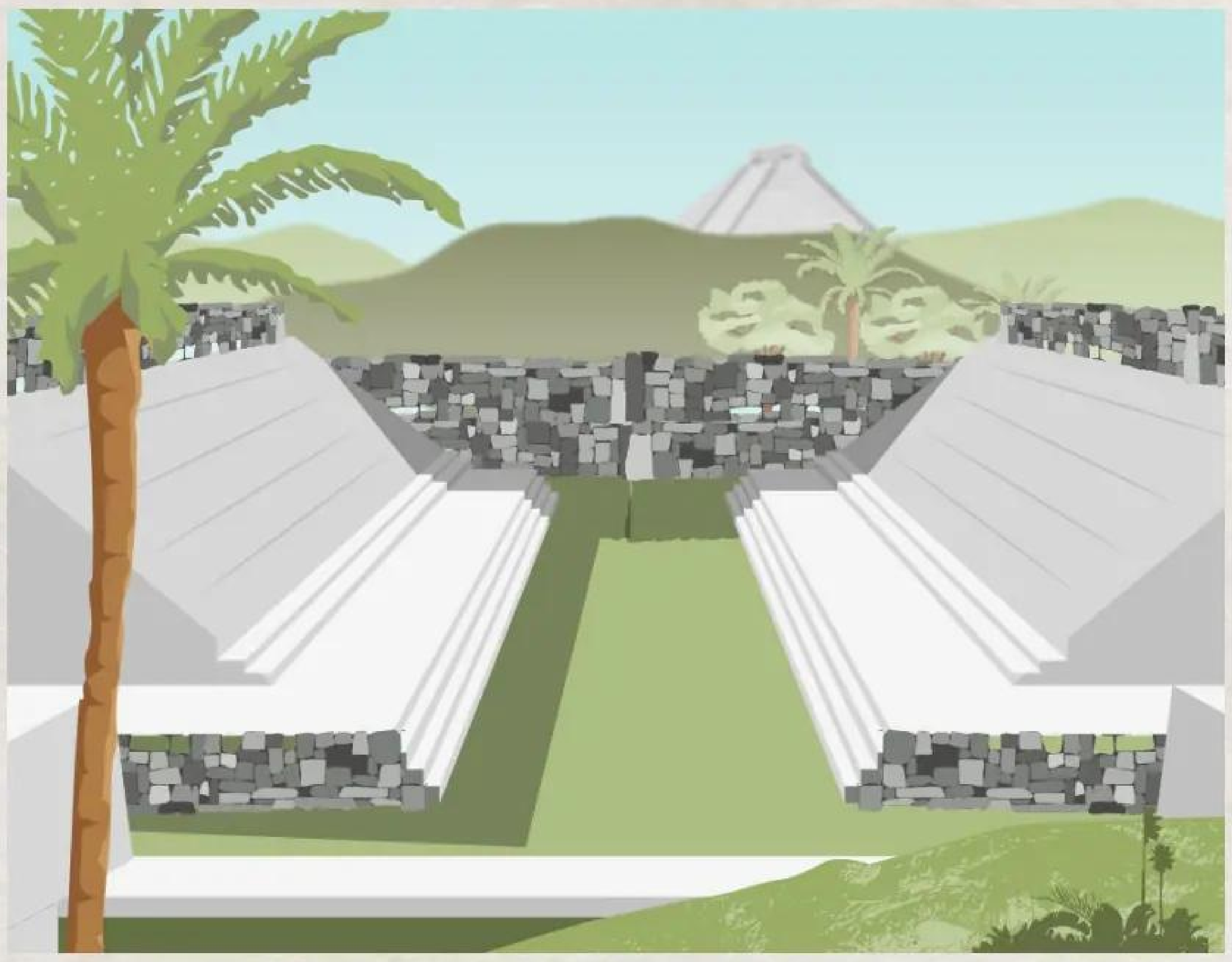


OBSIDIAN KNIFE FOR RITUAL SACRIFICE



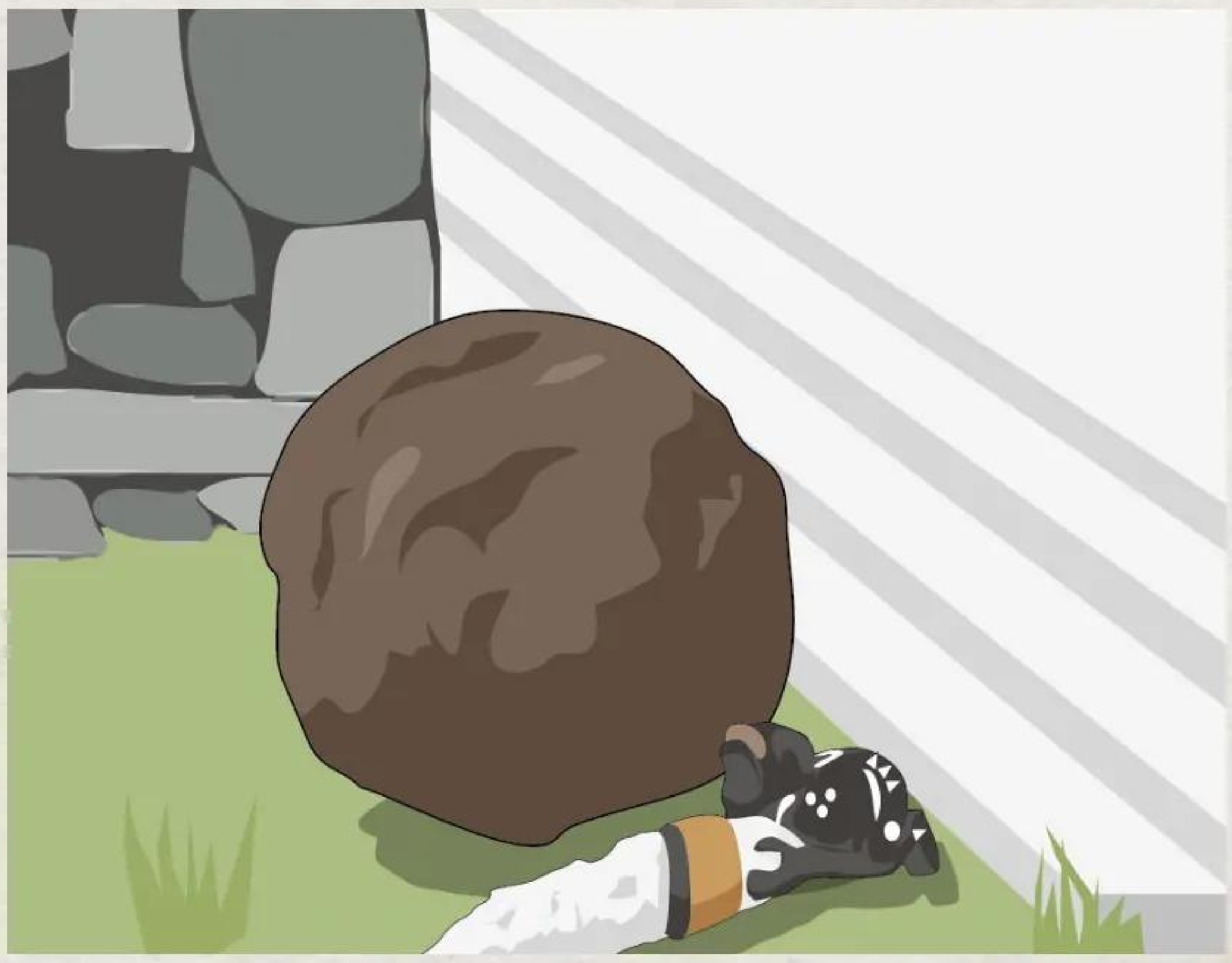
COURT

ANYTHING TO BET, SUCH AS LAND OR ORNATE OBJECTS



01 CONSTRUCT A COURT

When your tribe moves to a new settlement, the first thing you must do (after erecting a shrine to the god Huitzilopochtli, of course), is build a Tlachtli court. Construct a large I shape, with a central area for play and sloped sides to bounce the ball off. Add two hoops on either side, then make sure there are places for spectators and betting.



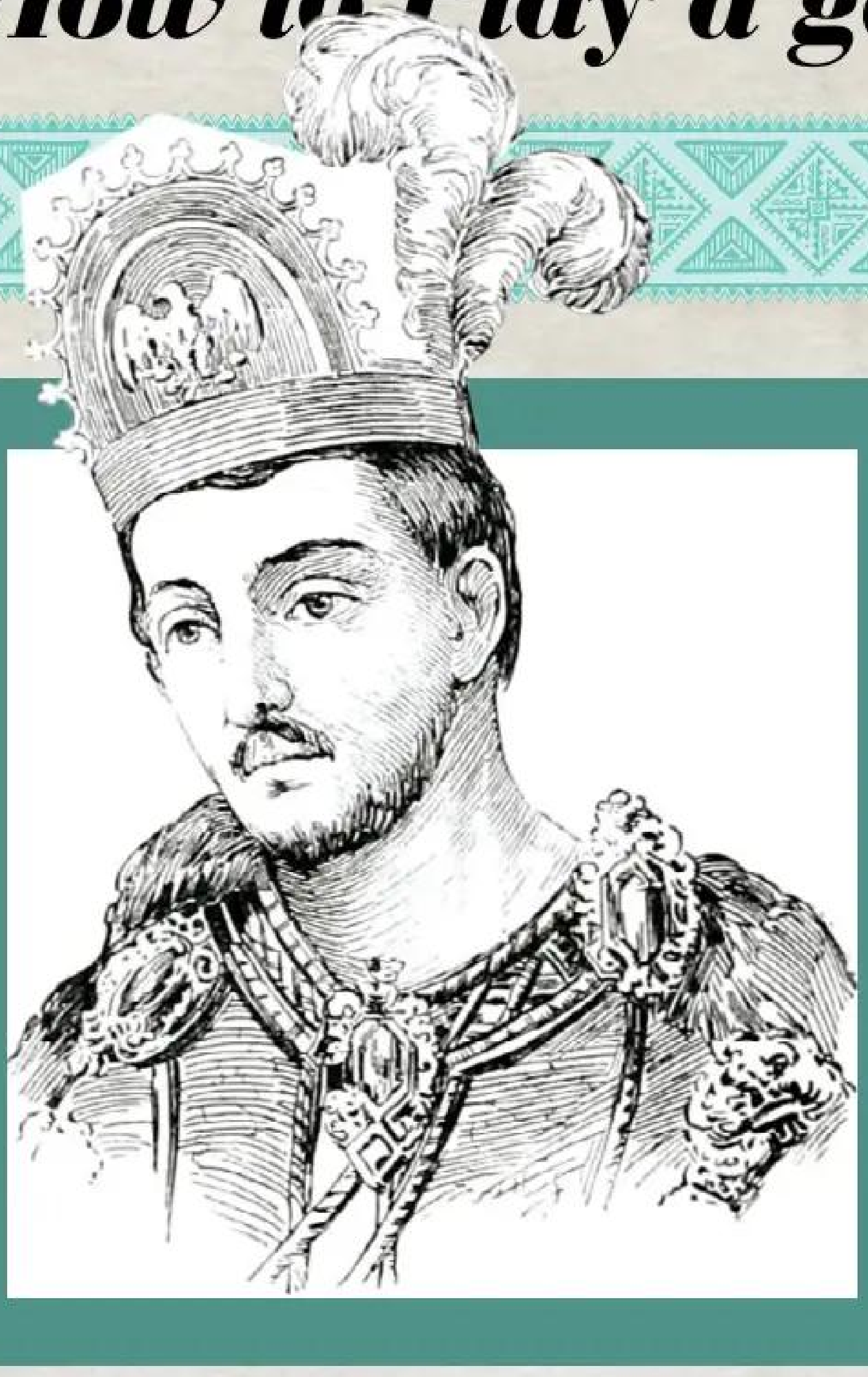
02 MAKE A BALL

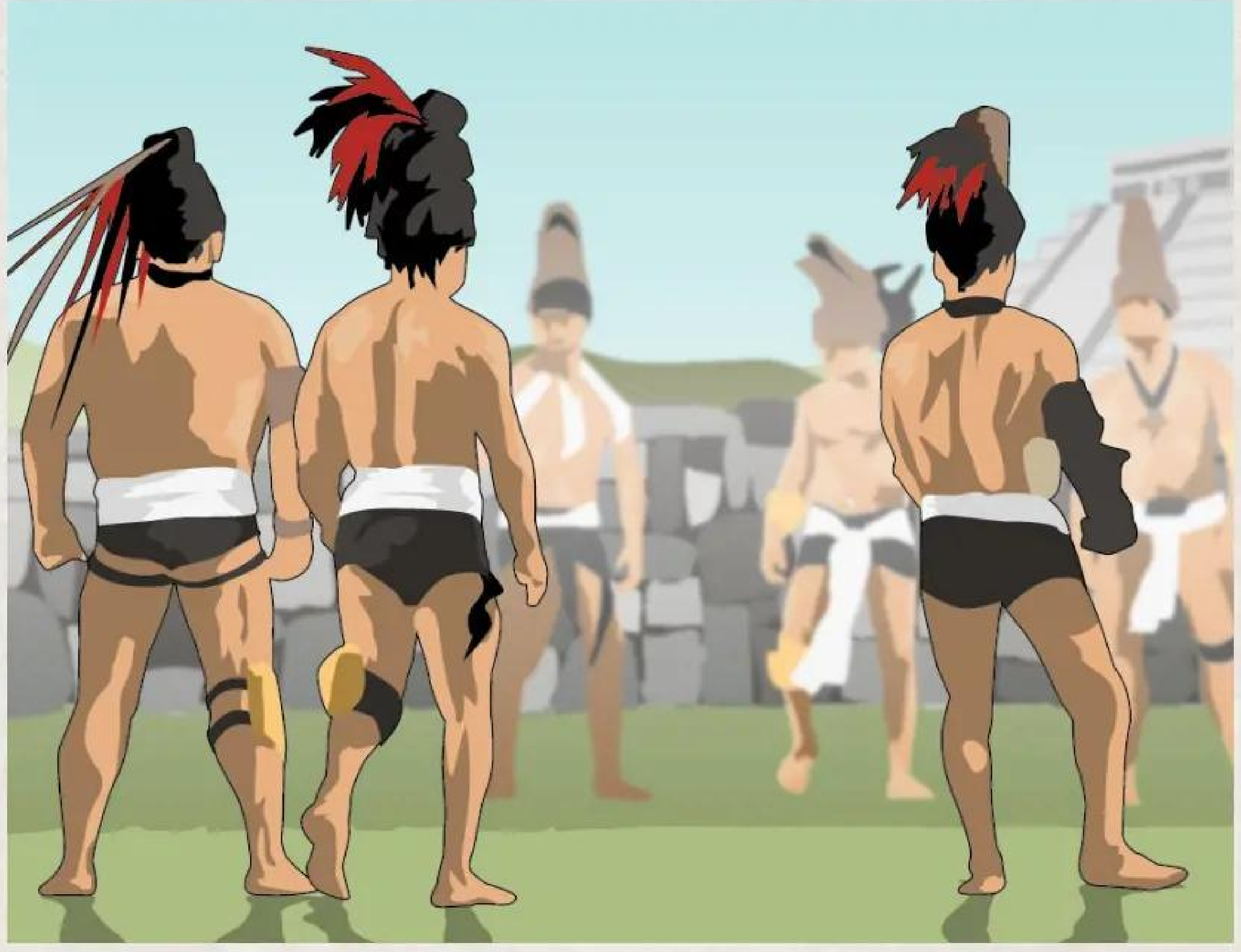
The ball for the game is made of hard, solid rubber. It weighs about four kilograms (nine pounds) and to get one, you'll need to go and see your village's expert rubber maker. These Aztec artisans mix a blend of natural latex (a milky-like substance found in some plants) with juice from morning glory plants to make the ball extra bouncy.

How not to...
play the game and lose your empire

Moctezuma II, one of the very last Aztec rulers and the one who welcomed Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés to Tenochtitlán, was a keen Tlachtli player. He was also very much a believer in omens and foretelling and so, when a rival king from neighbouring city-state Texcoco claimed that he had foretold the demise of Moctezuma's empire, the two decided to settle the score with a ball game. Moctezuma lost, which he considered to be yet another sign that his empire would crumble. Whether the ball game was the decider is unclear, but the empire did undoubtedly fall.

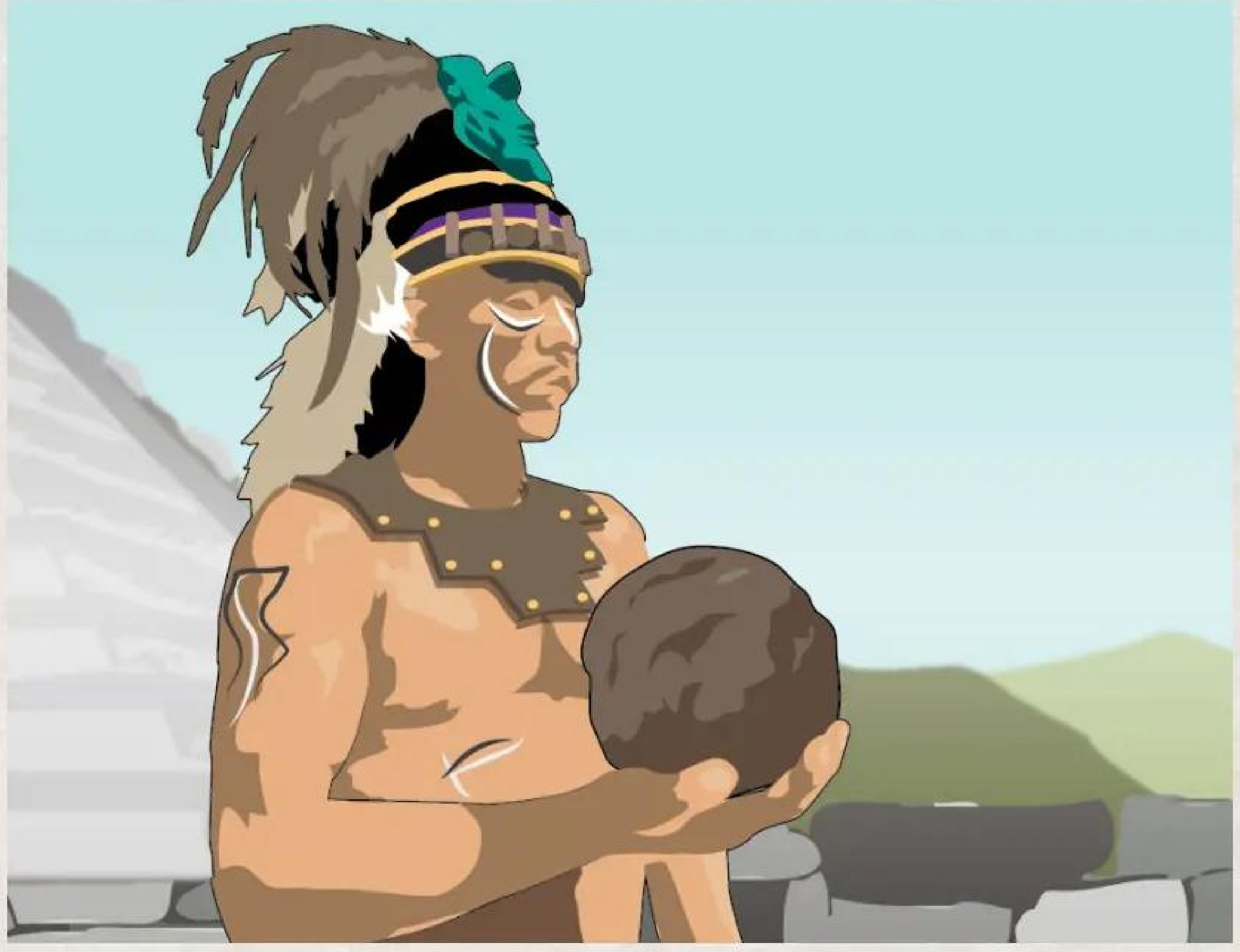
After Moctezuma welcomed Cortés to the Aztec capital, the Spaniards captured and killed him. Within a few short months, thanks to the Spaniards' more advanced weaponry and the spread of European disease, a siege put the mighty Tenochtitlán, and with it the Aztec empire, in the hands of the Spanish.





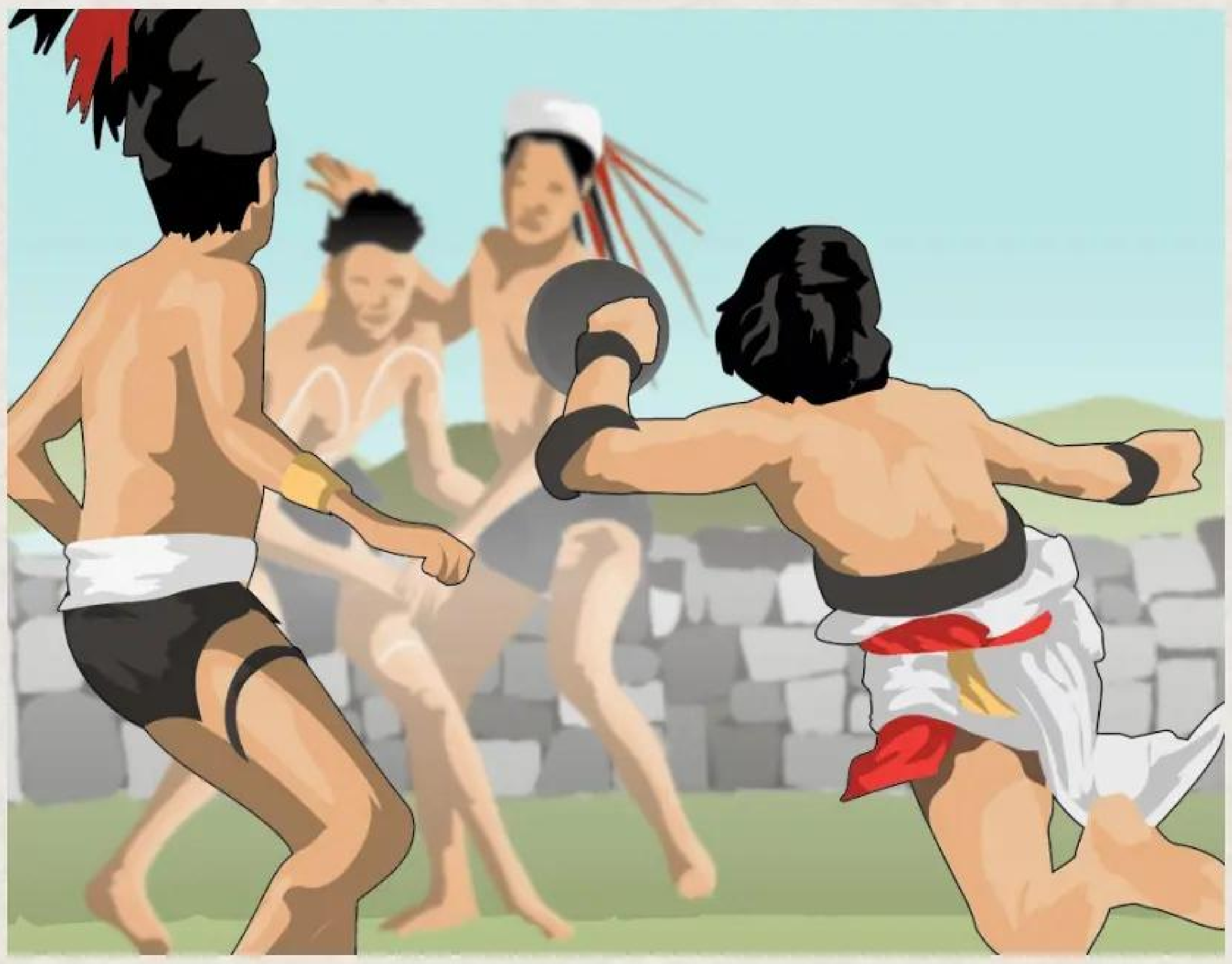
03 PICK TEAMS

Tlachtli is a tough game, so your players will need to be strong and agile – especially if you're competing against a rival village to settle a score. Alternatively, if the game is being held as part of a religious festival and you're planning on sacrificing the losers to the gods, you can use captured prisoners of war instead.



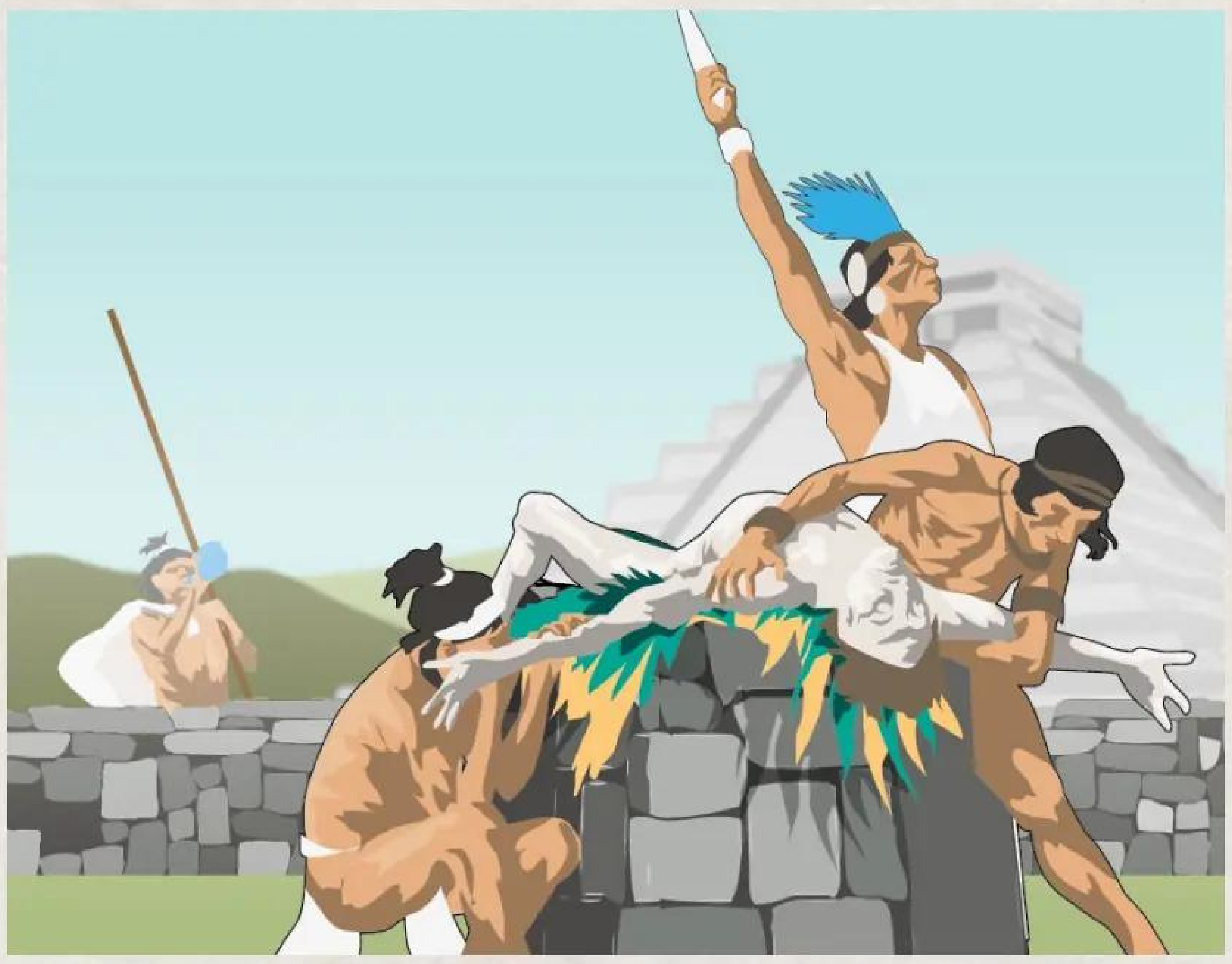
04 WEAR PROTECTIVE GEAR

Getting hit with a Tlachtli ball can break bones and cause internal bleeding, so to stay safe make sure to wear a padded belt called a yoke made of leather, cotton and wood. Also invest in padded armbands and kneepads. If the game has a ceremonial significance, feather headdresses may also be needed.



05 START PLAYING

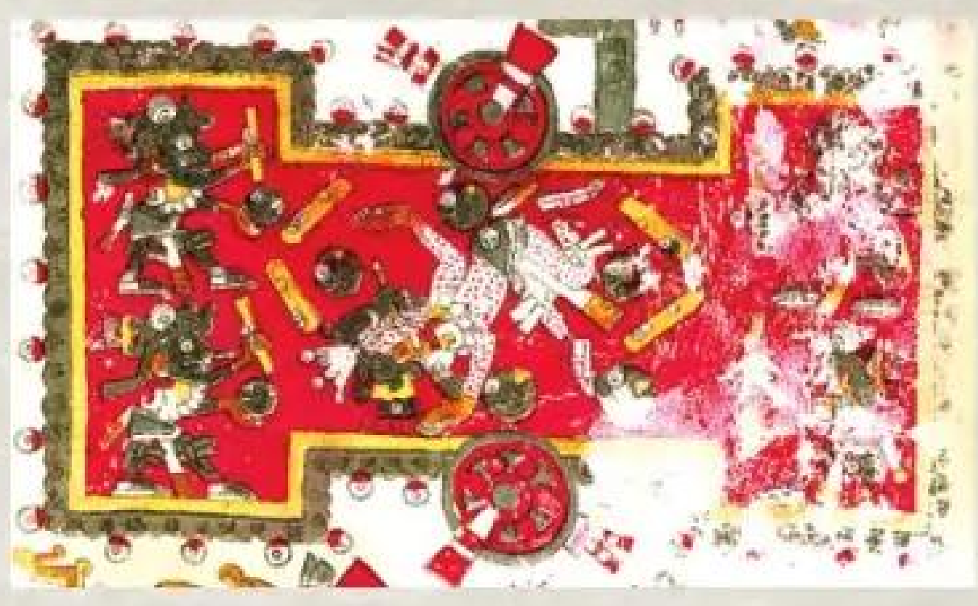
The aim of the game is to keep the ball in play. Players must chiefly use their hips to keep the ball in the air (although anything but hands is the accepted rule) and you can bounce it off the sloped walls in your attempts to get it over the central line. If you're skilled enough to put the ball through the hoops, you'll win extra points for your team.



06 MAKE THE SACRIFICE

Many Aztec ball games are played in order to provide sacrificial victims for the gods. This is an honour for the winning team or a punishment for the losing team depending on the significance of the match. Those being sacrificed should be beheaded by priests just off the court or at a nearby temple.

4 FAMOUS... BALLGAME COURTS



CODEX BORGIA

MESOAMERICA, C.1500

A folio from the *Codex Borgia* shows Aztec warriors on the I-shaped court playing the ball game using sticks.

SACRED BALL COURT

TENOCHTITLÁN, MEXICO, 1402-1506

June 2017 saw the excavation of the ball court at the Aztec capital, which is now Mexico City. The ball court was situated next to the circular temple of Quetzalcoatl.

BALL COURT AT MONTE ALBAN

OAXACA, MEXICO, 500 BCE

Monte Alban was the centre of Zapotec civilisation, which ruled most of what is now Oaxaca. Like most other pre-Colombian tribes, the ball court was a central part of their culture.

PASO DE LA AMADA

CHIAPAS, MEXICO, 1400 BCE

The oldest known ball court dates back 3,400 years. Its placement suggests that it was built for elite players but not in connection with ceremonial worship.

© Ed Crooks

Eating with the Aztecs

Like European societies, the Aztecs had access to a rich and opulent diet, but this was largely determined by class

Written by Harry Cunningham

When the Spanish arrived in Tenochtitlán they were amazed by what they saw. But of all the things that captured their imagination, it wasn't the extraordinary buildings, the temples or the sophisticated canal system – it was the lavish food and drink they encountered that really astounded them. Indeed, one of the most fascinating descriptions we have of Aztec culture is the account of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a Spanish solider under Hernán Cortés, who led the first expedition to Mexico in 1519. In *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico (New Spain),* he describes in rich detail a lavish banquet held by Aztec leader Moctezuma II:

"His cooks had upwards of thirty different ways of treating meats and they had earthen vessels so contrived as to keep them always hot. For the table of Moctezuma himself, above three hundred dishes were dressed, and for his guards, above a thousand… the ordinary meats were domestic, fowls, pheasants, geese, partridges, quails, venison, Indian hogs, pigeons, hares and rabbits, with many other animals and birds peculiar to [Europe]… Fruit of all the kinds that the country produced was laid before [Moctezuma]; he ate very little, but from time to time, a liquor prepared from cocoa and of a simulative, or corroborative quality, as we were told, was presented to him in golden cups. We could not at that time see if he drank it or not, but I observed a number of jars, above fifty, brought in and filled with foaming chocolate, of which he took some, which the women presented to him… during the time Moctezuma was at dinner, two very beautiful women were busily employed making small cakes with eggs and other things mixed therein. These were delicately white, and they presented them to him on plates covered with napkins. Also, another kind of bread was brought to him in long loaves and plates of cakes resembling wafers. After he had dined, they presented to him three little canes highly ornamented, containing liquid amber, mixed with a herb they called tobacco, and when he had sufficiently viewed and heard the singers, dancers and buffoons, he took a little of the smoke of one of these canes, and then laid himself down to sleep.

"After this was over, all his guards and domestics sat down to dinner, and as near as I could judge, above a thousand plates of those eatables that I have mentioned were laid before them, with vessels of foaming chocolate, chocolate, and fruit in an immense quantity."

We also get a glimpse of the culture of human sacrifice for which the Aztecs have become famous, as Castillo tells us that: "I have heard it said that they [Moctezuma's cooks] were wont to cook for him the flesh of young boys, but as he had such a variety of dishes, made of so many things, we could not succeed in seeing if they were human flesh or of other things… so we had no insight into it." However, it's worth noting that this was probably just a rumour.

A mural by Diego Rivera shows Aztecs preparing food

The Aztecs and Chocolate

These ancient peoples prized the sweet treat more highly than even the most ardent modern-day chocoholic

The word chocolate, or chocolati, refers to the cacao bean and water and evokes the taste: 'bitter water'.

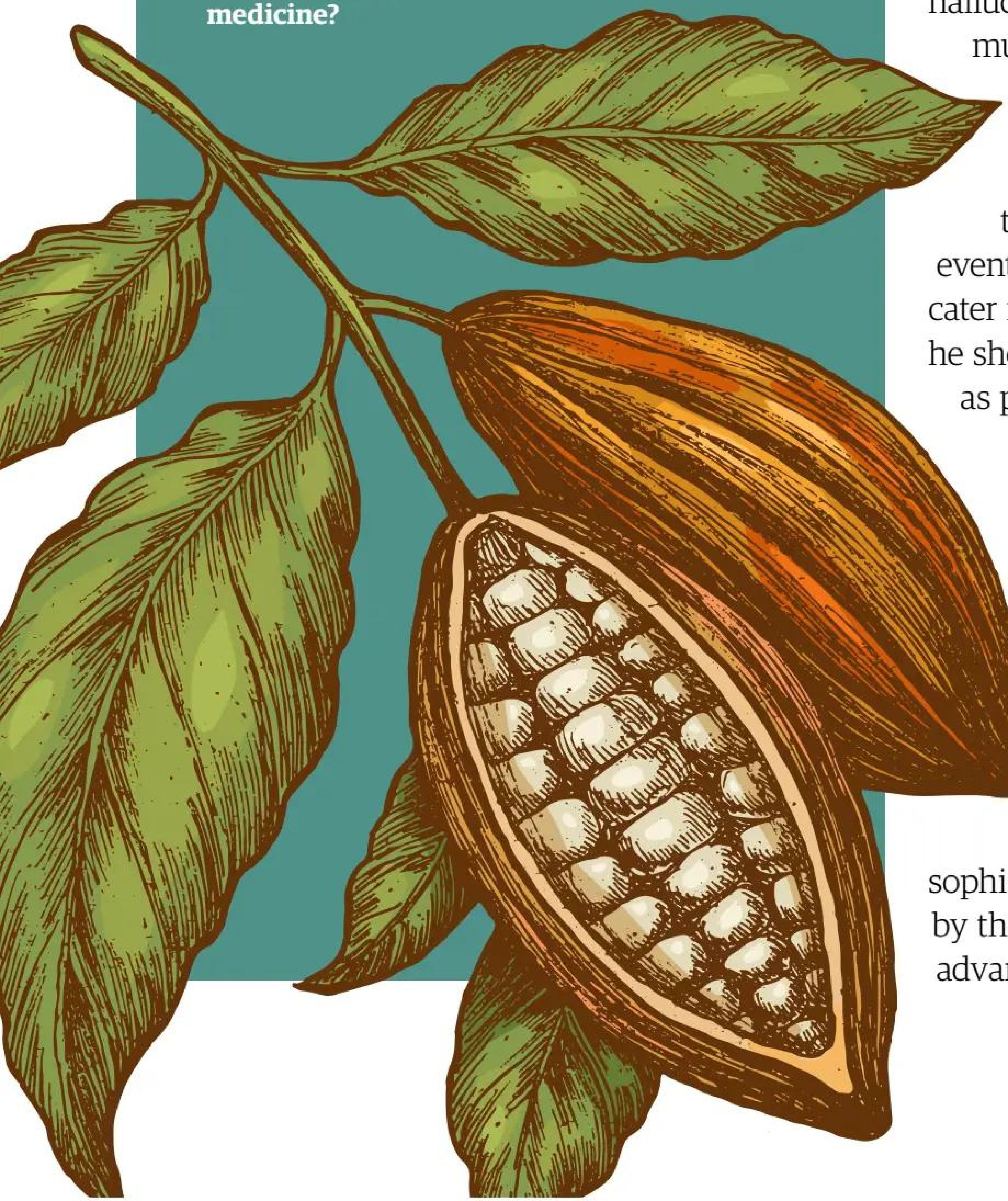
Chocolate and the cacao bean have actually been around far longer than even the Aztecs – the Maya consumed it between 500-800 CE.

The Aztecs used the cocoa bean as a beverage, a medicine and even as a currency. *The Badianus Manuscript* – written by a Spaniard but compiled with the help of local Aztecs – reveals how the flowers of the cacao plant were used in baths to help reduce fatigue, to treat stomach bugs, diarrhoea and – combined with liquid from the bark of a silk cotton tree – it could also cure infections. As well as being the primary ingredient in many medicines, it was also used as a sweetener that could be mixed with foul-tasting drugs.

Cacao seeds were also traded as a currency. When the Spanish first arrived in Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma II had a fortune of around a billion cacao beans, stored in great cubes and what *Ancient Aztecs* author Lisa Marty has described as being akin to a royal bank. The Aztec rulers were said to have drunk 50 cups of chocolate a day, so to save Aztec royalty from literally drinking their fortunes away, there were four types of cacao beans and only one that was used as a currency.

As chocolate today is graded and its price can vary enormously depending on the perceived quality of the product, so Aztecs were discerning about their chocolate. The Nahuatl term tlaquetzalli or 'precious thing' was used to describe the purest chocolate, which had the highest percentage of cacao and had not been mixed with other ingredients.

Cacao: the best medicine?

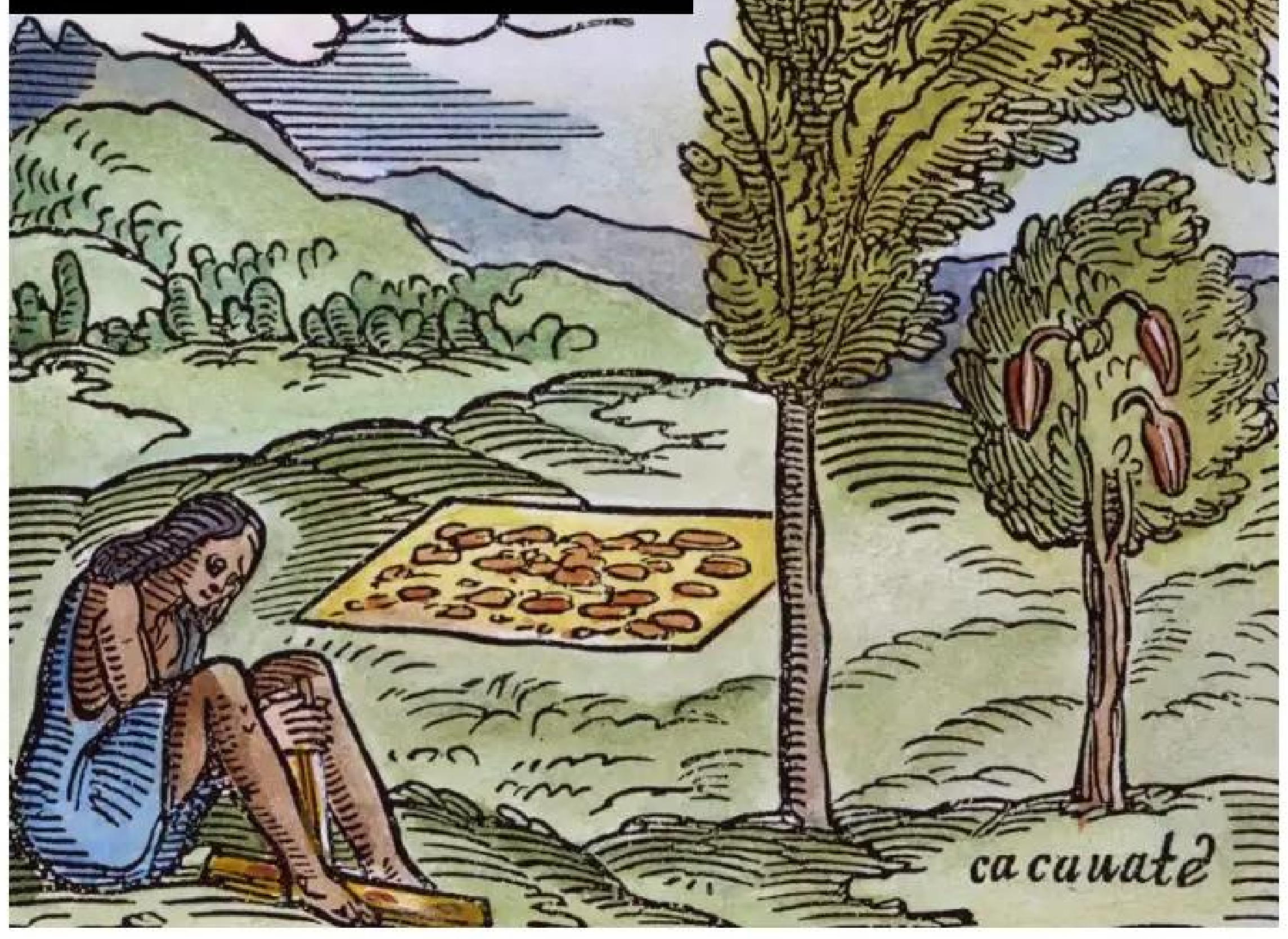


"Guests would be offered hallucinogenic 'magic' mushrooms at dawn to induce visions to be discussed later at the meal"

Putting aside the claims of cannibalism, what the dinner reveals is a culture not to dissimilar to what the Spanish would have experienced at royal courts in Europe: feasts abundant in high-quality meats, eggs and cakes served on the finest dishes.

The dinner also gives us a glimpse of the banqueting culture of the higher classes in the Aztec empire. Women cooked much of the food, as they did in the home, and were particularly skilled at transforming the various plants, fruits, beans and spices into the sauces and accompaniments to dishes that we would find familiar today. They also prepared food for the Aztec armies during their campaigns, accompanying them to places often far from the boundaries of the Empire.

An Aztec grinding chocolate under the cacao tree



Male guests at a dinner celebrating a baptism would be offered tobacco to smoke in ceramic pipes before the food was served – in Europe, smoking was usually a pastime reserved for the end of the meal – whilst a chocolate drink would be served to male guests only at the end of the meal; women, by contrast, were severed a gruel composed of maize and water. At a much rarer feast of the pochteca, a class in Aztec society just below the very top and composed of members of trade guilds, guests would be offered hallucinogenic 'magic' mushrooms at dawn to induce visions to be discussed later at the meal. There was an expectation that the meal should be more than a one-day event, that the host should have the resources to cater for his guests for at least two days, and that he should also offer them an alcoholic drink known as pulque.

After the subjugation of South America, chocolate became a fashionable drink of choice for Europe's wealthy

But these dinners were far removed from the experience of the average Aztec citizen. Meat was not a large part of ordinary Aztecs' diet at all – most citizens consumed it only in very small portions – but nevertheless, it seems that by the time of the 16th century, game reserves may have been running very low. That Moctezuma was able to eat so extravagantly shows the extent of the ruler's power, status and sophistication. But all of this was made possible by the lower classes, who had developed relatively advanced farming and agricultural policies that ensured the Aztecs could survive even the harshest of droughts.

Instrumental to this were the chinampas – from the Nahuatl word for land enclosed by hedges – or floating gardens. These narrow, rectangular islands of 6-10 metres by 110 metres, still used today, are layered with vegetation and dirt and mud, but are high in organic material from Lake Texcoco, which acts as a fertilizer for the soil, meaning the islands are perfect for growing crops. For the Aztecs, they were also highly versatile and could grow staple roots, vegetables, grain and fruit crops all year round. It is thought that by the time Cortés arrived in 1519, the chinampas supplied food for up to 100,000 people.

But the chinampas in the lakes were just one source of food. The Aztecs had their own gardens in the towns and cities, which they used for growing crops, and they also farmed the vast, sloping hills of the surrounding valley. Here, they built stone walls – known as terraces – to level the land so that the crops could be planted and farming could take place.

While contour terraces were used on hillsides, cross-channel terraces or check dams were employed for ravines. Cross-channel terraces were stone walls built in ditches or ravines at right angles to the direction of the water flow, whereas contour terraces were built into the hillside on which soil could settle, giving the impression of giant steps. They allowed for small patches of land where crops could be grown. Both were constructed slowly, bit by bit rather than all at once, and were the least productive of all the farming

Shrimp and Cactus Salad

This desert delicacy adds a somewhat 'spiky' kick to the classic salad

This recipe comes from *The Florentine Codex*, a similar study of Aztec culture to *The Codex Mendoza* but written later in the 16th century. While we are using shrimp in this recipe, the Aztecs were known to have added whatever they could find swimming around Lake Texcoco including fish, frogs and even tadpoles. The cactus could be used either raw or cooked.

Ingredients

- 1 pound cactus paddles (make sure you remove the spikes or thorns)
- 2 gloves of minced garlic
- 2 medium diced tomatoes
- 1 small diced onion
- ½ diced jicama (Mexican Turnip)
- 2 finely chopped serrano peppers
- 3 tablespoons lime juice
- Salt
- 1 pound of shrimp (or whatever fish is available)

1. Chop the cactus into small pieces and boil for 5-7 minutes
2. Cook the shrimp in the water until pink.
3. Drain the shrimp and chop.
4. Mix the cactus and shrimp and add the rest of the ingredients.

techniques, but Aztec agriculture – like much of their society – focused on adapting to all of their unique surroundings, and utilizing every part of their environment to maximize their output, rather than relying too heavily on the chinampas.

Farmers in Aztec society worked incredibly hard – they did not use animals or technology to assist them in ploughing, and the methods they used became more intensive as the population grew and more conquered towns and provinces became part of the Empire. They used a tool known as a coa – a kind of flat spade – to dig the land and their tasks included weeding, levelling the soil, taking up the stones, digging, furrowing, planting, watering, digging holes for the beans and sowing them. The Aztecs also used flat-bottomed canoes to navigate the chinampas. Harvested crops were transported into town by human porters known as tlameme, who often carried the goods on their backs with the aid of a special type of strap called a tumpline, or mecapal.

Whilst we do not know for certain, such a sophisticated network of chinampas must have required some form of oversight and organisation at state level – it cannot have simply been left down to individual families and communities to arrange themselves. As Kenneth Hirth and Deborah L. Nichols write in *The Oxford Handbook Of The Aztecs*, "People at all levels of society were involved in commercial exchange to mobilize the commodities that they needed or desired. What varied was their level of involvement and the degree to which it constituted a major strategy used to meet household subsistence needs."

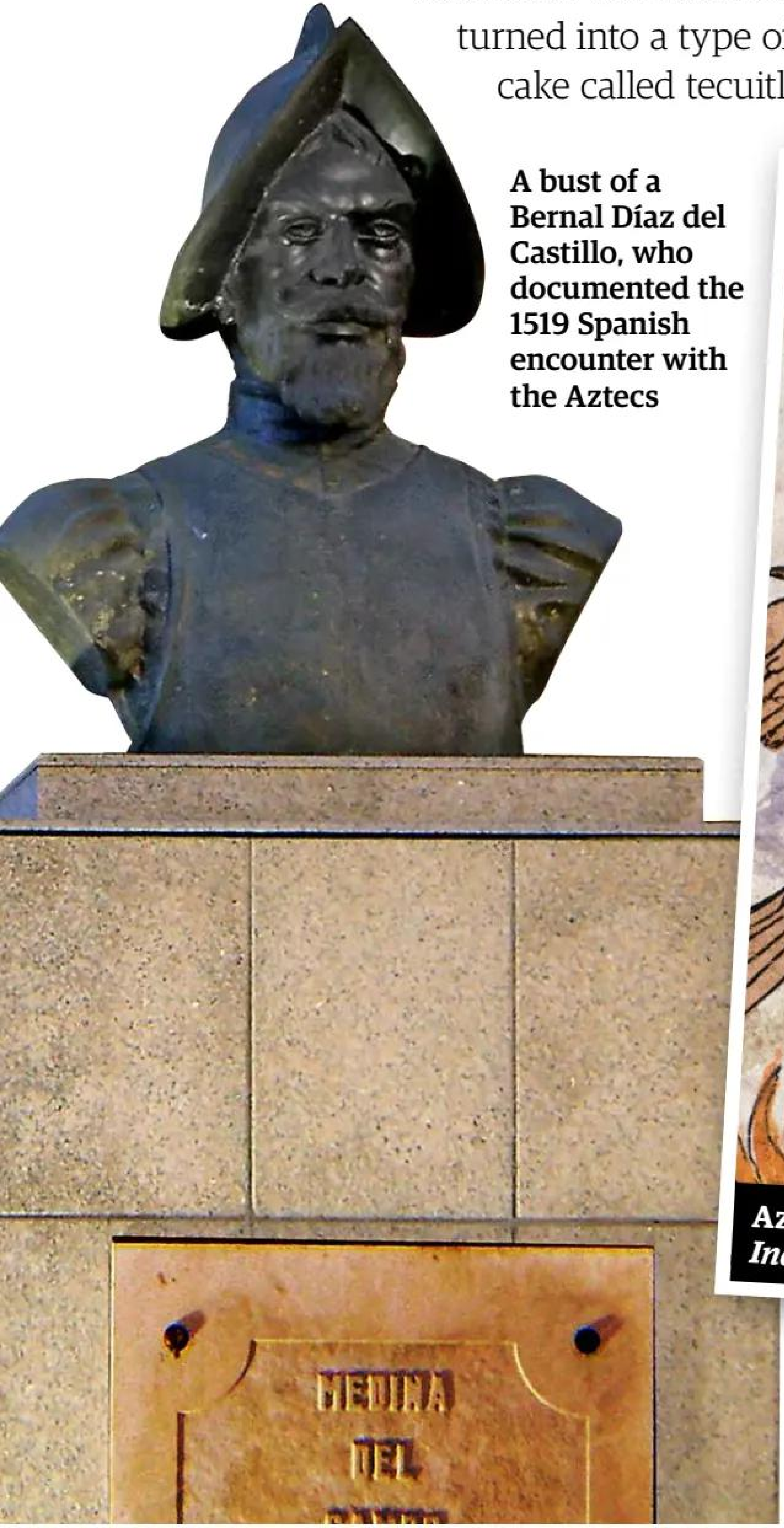
Nothing went to waste in Aztec society. Insects such as worms and grasshoppers were regularly consumed, while high-protein algae from the lake was fished out with nets and then turned into a type of bread or cake called tecuitlatl and sold as street food. When dried it was about 1.5 inches thick and could be cut into bricks, and, due to its saltiness, could be stored for up to a year. Castillo sampled some and said it tasted like cheese. Cactus was also a delicacy and could be boiled and used in a variety of dishes, including in a salad – see the recipe above if you want to try it out for yourself.

Maize was probably the most important part of the Aztec diet and was often rolled into balls with beans or chilli in the centre. It was also a key ingredient in a popular drink called atole – a mix of maize flour, water and cinnamon. A prized delicacy was pozole, a soup/stew of maize kernels often mixed with pork, chillies and cabbage. Because maize was so important to the Aztec diet, there were gods who were specifically associated with it, such as Chicomecóatl. Before the maize seeds were planted, the farmer would allegedly address them directly asking for a good harvest, and before the maize was used in cooking, the cooks would thank it. A typical Aztec saying, a kind of praise, was to say that somebody had 'reached the season of the green maize ear'.

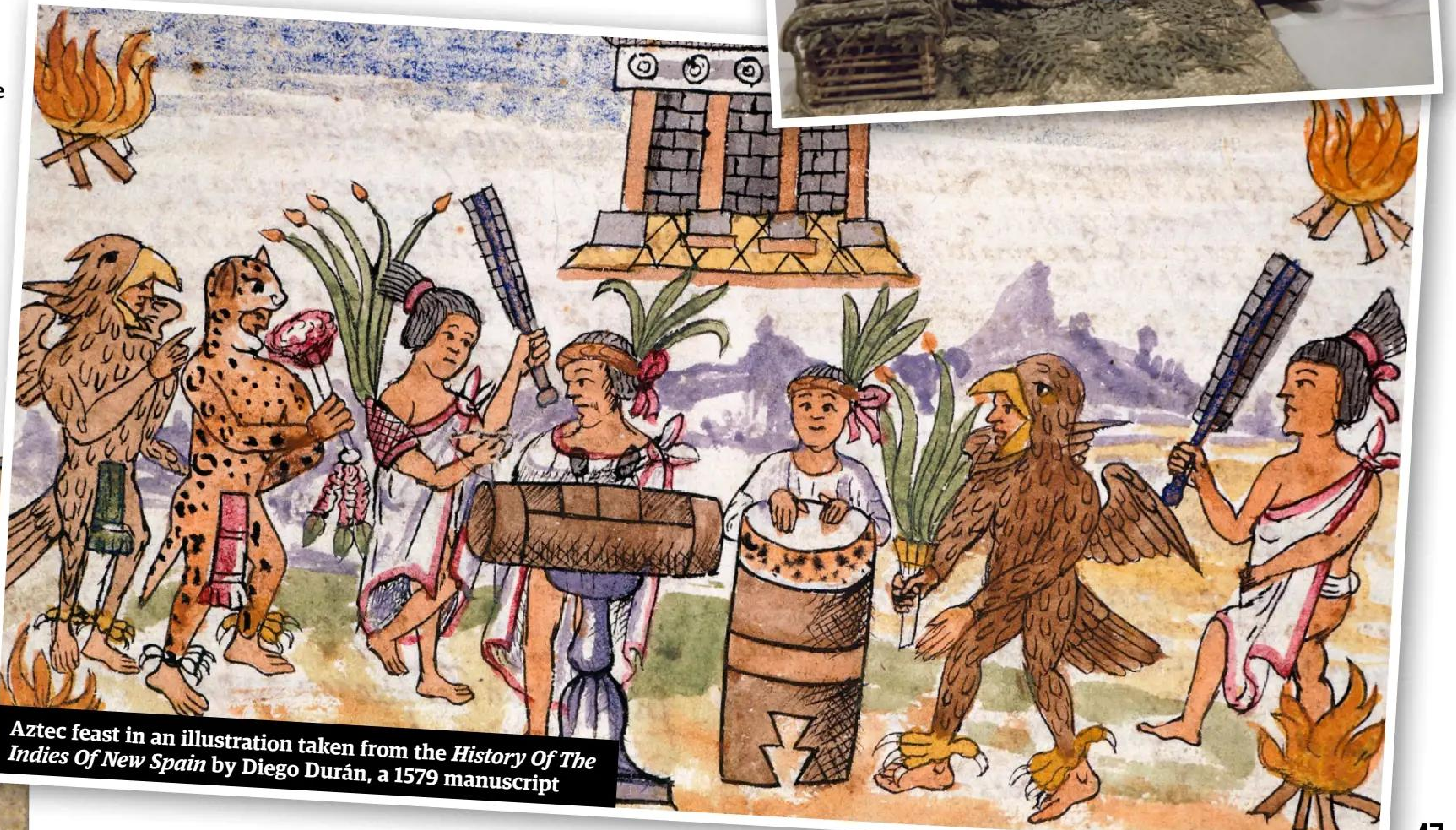
Beans were important, too. Although plain like maize, a lot could be done in terms of flavour with the various condiments that were available to the Aztec cooks, including tomatoes, chillies, spices and even avocados.

With maize being the staple diet in the surrounding towns and provinces, some historians have questioned the nutritional value

A reconstruction of the market place at Tenochtitlán, Mexico



A bust of a Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who documented the 1519 Spanish encounter with the Aztecs


Aztec feast in an illustration taken from the *History Of The Indies Of New Spain* by Diego Durán, a 1579 manuscript

Aztec Hot Chocolate

An Aztec take on the classic wintery warmer

Chocolate's sacred place in Aztec culinary culture meant it was a favourite at special feasts and banquets and not the casual drink that is as freely available as tea and coffee at our favourite café chains. But rather than sweetening it with sugar, which wasn't known to them, the Aztecs embraced the bitterness, adding chilli peppers and even mushrooms to the drink. It was the Spanish who first experimented with drinking it hot in the 16th century, adding their own condiments and spices such as vanilla and cinnamon. This recipe does not contain sugar and is intended to emulate the chocolate that the Aztecs would have known.

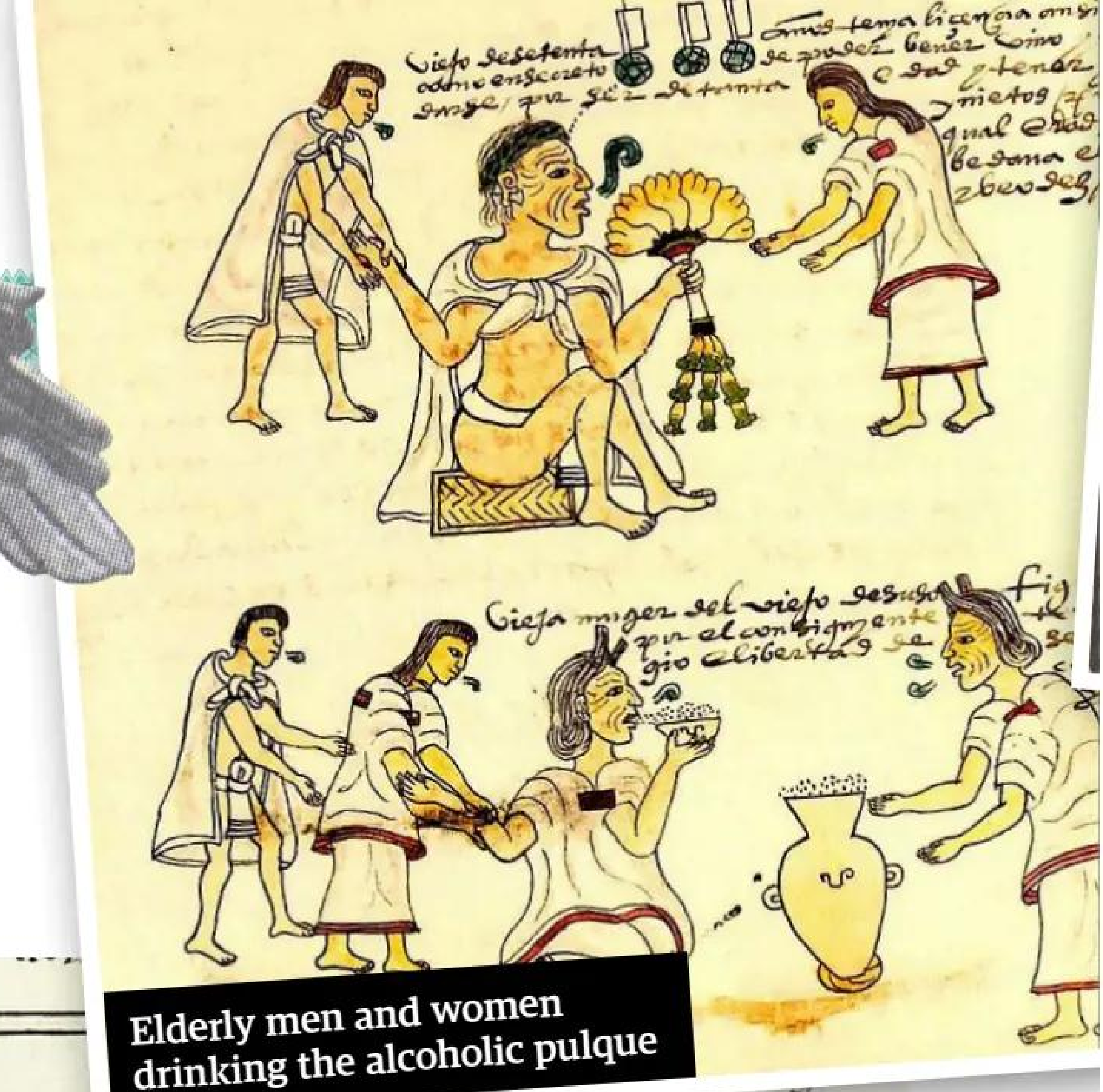
Ingredients:

- 1 cup (300-500ml) of hot water
- 2 ounces of unsweetened chocolate (cooking chocolate)
- 3 tablespoons of honey
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 3 cups of hot milk (for hot chocolate, the thicker the milk the better for a creamier taste, so full-fat milk is better than skimmed or semi-skimmed)
- Cinnamon bark sticks (one per cup)

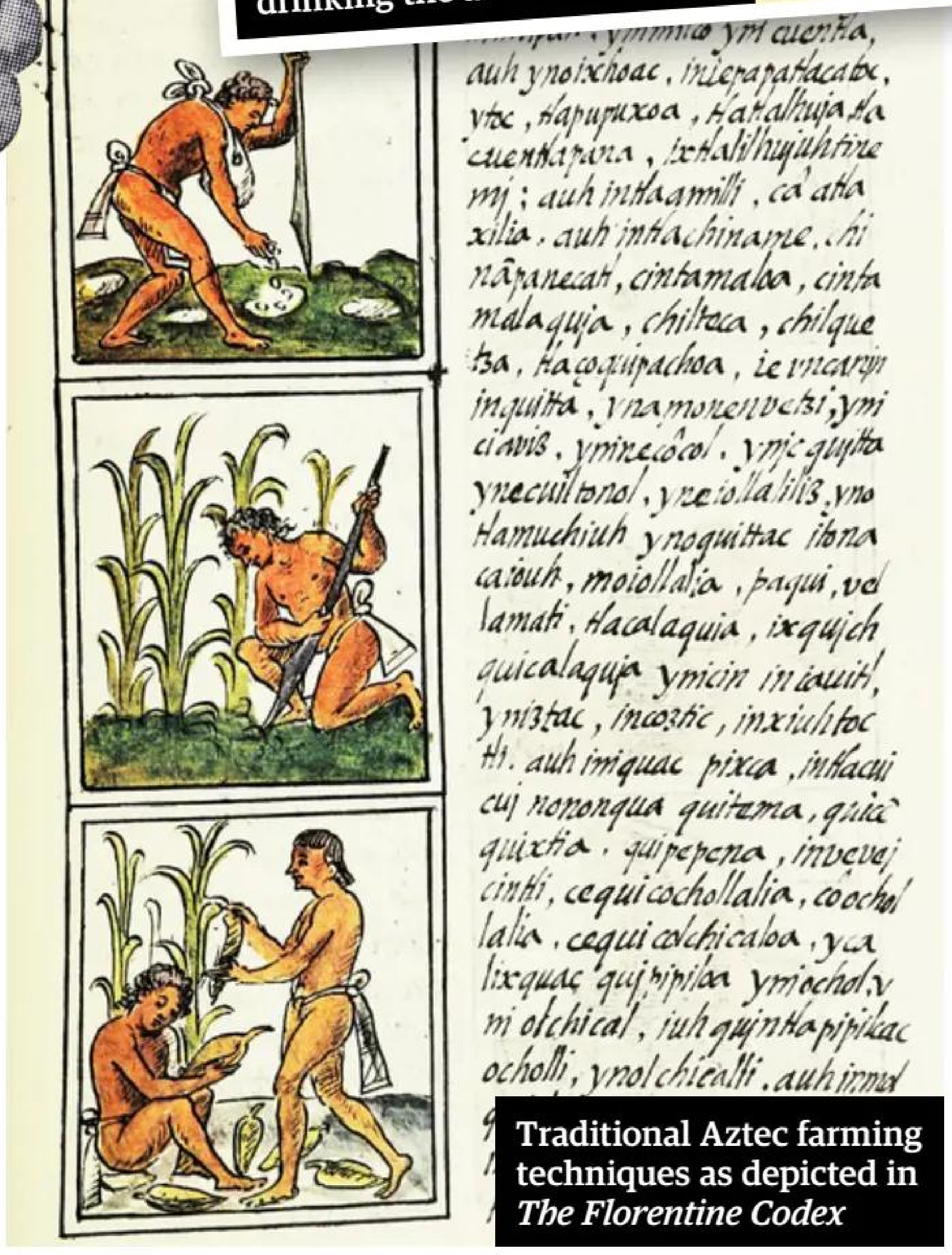
1. Heat the water and the milk in separate pans
2. Break up the chocolate and add it to the water, stirring it until it melts.
3. Add the honey, salt and ground cinnamon
4. Gradually pour in the warmed-up milk, stirring constantly.
5. Serve in mugs and add one cinnamon stick per cup.

Recipe taken from The Middle Ages by S. Wise Bauer (Peace Hill Press, 2003), p.180

An Aztec carrying food to market



Elderly men and women drinking the alcoholic pulque



Traditional Aztec farming techniques as depicted in *The Florentine Codex*

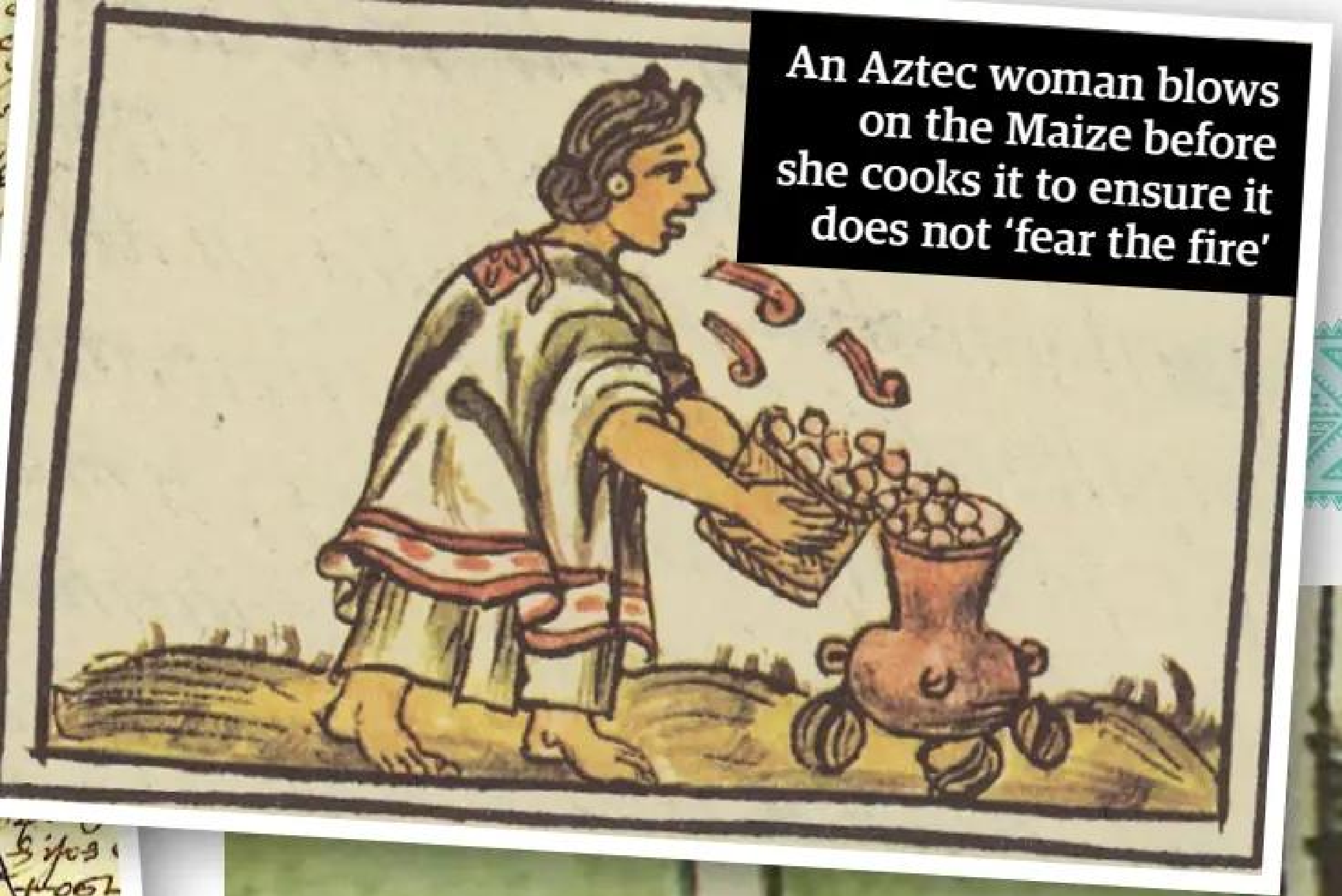
of the Aztec diet, particularly the lack of protein despite the availability of meat. Tecuitlatl was high in many, though not all, of these proteins, hence its popularity. Some historians have theorised that the lack of protein in the Aztec diet may have accounted for the human sacrifices and alleged cannibalism that followed, but this seems far-fetched and a theory for which there is little evidence. Equally, it would be wrong to suggest that the Aztecs were somehow malnourished and that this was a starving society. Whilst maize alone could not provide all of the protein that is required for a good diet, the Aztec people discovered that if they ate lime-soaked maize with beans this could fulfil their protein needs.

Archaeologist Michael E. Smith pondered how a society that knew nothing about the chemical and biological science of the body that informs modern diets today could have worked this out and suggests the solution is simple: "I have asked modern Mesoamerican 'peasant women' why they soak the maize [in lime] before cooking it, and their answer is that the tortillas don't taste right if the maize is not lime soaked. The Aztec ancestors of these women five centuries ago probably would have said the same thing." Indeed, like much of Aztec culture, a combination of a process of trial and error and an intuition of simply adapting themselves to their environment and circumstances stood them in good stead.

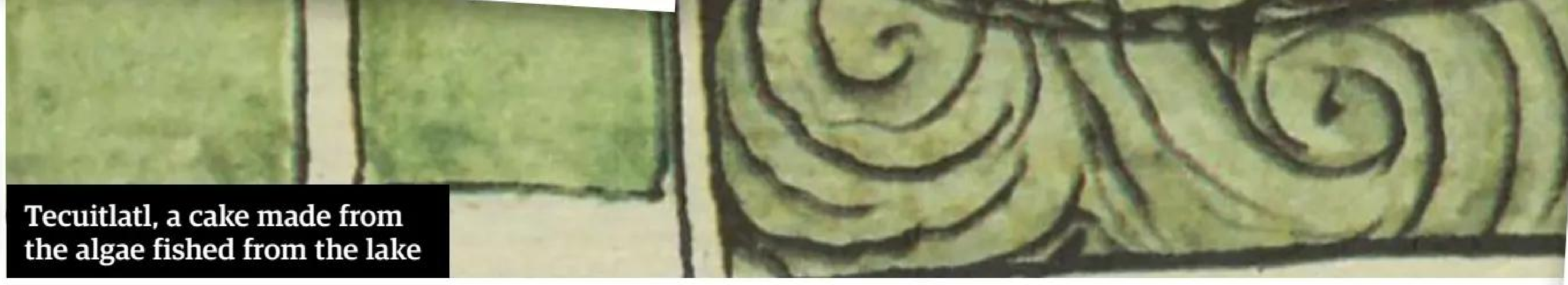
Of the meat that the Aztecs did eat, dogs were one of their delicacies. The fact that the Aztecs kept small dogs as pets and also ate them as food was something that was unheard of to the Spanish conquerors, who were intrigued by the practice. In a letter to Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, Charles V, Cortés says dogs were 'tasty', suggesting he had broken the taboo and tried the meat. These were not chihuahuas, as one might expect, but rather a hairless type of dog. There is evidence that the Aztecs also tried to domesticate turkeys, which they would eat as well. Tadpoles and frogs were also a great delicacy in Aztec culture, and it was not unheard of for peccary (a pig-like mammal), rabbits, mice, armadillos, snakes, possums and iguanas to be on the menu.

Many of these goods and foodstuffs would be sold at local markets. In fact, it was enshrined in

> "Some historians have theorised that the lack of protein may have accounted for the human sacrifices and alleged cannibalism"



An Aztec woman blows on the Maize before she cooks it to ensure it does not 'fear the fire'



Tecuitlatl, a cake made from the algae fished from the lake

The traditional Aztec beverage atole, still a staple of Mexican street food today

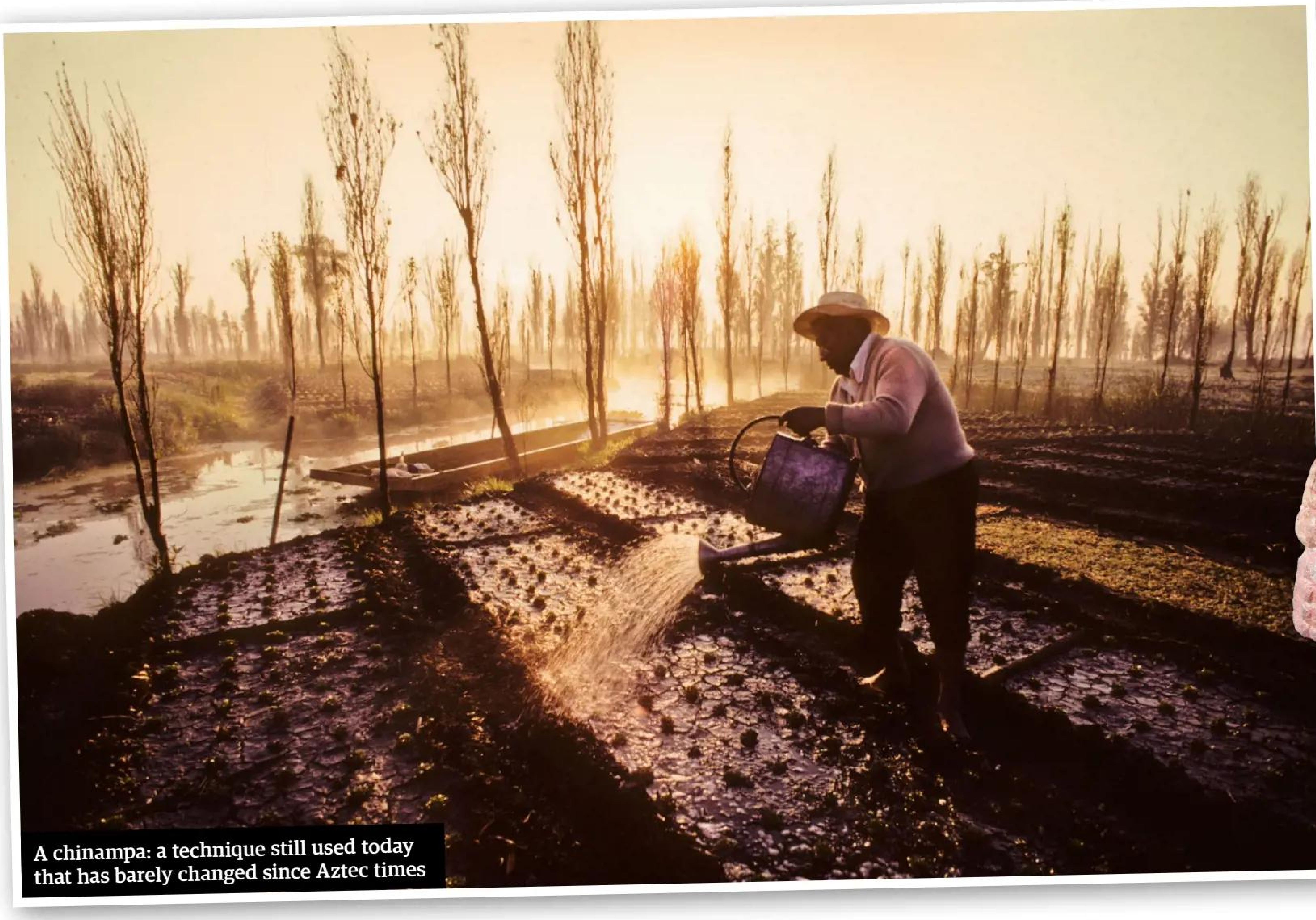
Aztec law that transactions had to take place within the market: this way there was some oversight to ensure that everybody was getting a fair price and nobody was getting ripped off. It also meant that tax - a kind of Aztec VAT - could be collected on the spot. These markets were held daily in the big cities like Tenochtitlán and in the further-out smaller towns and villages the markets may have rotated on 5-, 9-, 13- and 20-day cycles. The idea was that there would be a market available for buyers no more than a day's walk away, although the sellers were expected to travel, sometimes considerable distances. Both bartering and currency were acceptable at the market.

Tlatelcoco market might have attracted 25,000 shoppers each day - and double that for special occasions

The Aztecs did drink alcohol, though it was far from the only intoxicating substance available. The most popular drink was pulque, or octil, created from the sap of the maguey plant. This drink, still consumed, was considered sacred in the same way as chocolate. Milky in appearance, it often has a foamy head, and has a sour, yeasty taste - like beer that's not been fermented long enough.

It is also clear that the Aztecs found it highly disrespectful to over-indulge in alcohol. Punishments for being drunk in Aztec society were severe depending on the age and class of the guilty party. If a young person was caught by an official being drunk in public or even if they had alcohol in their possession, they would be killed. A student of the lower classes would be beaten to death or strangled in public to set an example, while a student from a higher class would be strangled to death by a garrote behind closed doors. An adult citizen would effectively get a severe warning for their first offence and would have their head shaved, receiving a death sentence for a second offence. Older Aztec citizens, however, could drink pulque within the law - and were encouraged to enjoy it.

While it's easy to feel that a culture that lived entirely outside of Western influence and experiences would be completely alien to us, many Aztec practices were actually fairly similar to what we know about the dining culture in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. What people ate and drank was largely based around class and religion, with the nobles and ruler eating freshly caught local meats at lavish banquets with strictly defined courses, and the lower classes relying more on the plants and crops that were grown in their local neighbourhood and sold at the market. It just goes to show that no matter how distant or different other cultures from the past might seem, at the heart of it all, we've a lot more in common than you might think.



A chinampa: a technique still used today that has barely changed since Aztec times

A statue, originating from the Mayor's Temple of Tenochtitlán, depicting Chicomecóatl, goddess of agriculture

© Alamy, Getty Images

Inside the capital: Tenochtitlán

From a marshy island in a lake, an immense and marvellous city rose to be the centre of the Aztec empire

Written by Dominic Eames

Anyone seeing Tenochtitlán for the first time, looking from a surrounding hill upon the city that seemed to have emerged from the water itself, must have been filled utterly with awe at its size and the skill of its makers. To reach it on foot, they would cross the lake by walking along one of three mighty causeways that stretched for miles and were wide enough for over a dozen people to walk side by side. Or they could go by canoe and get closer to the floating gardens, the human-made plots spreading out from the island where farmers grew their crops.

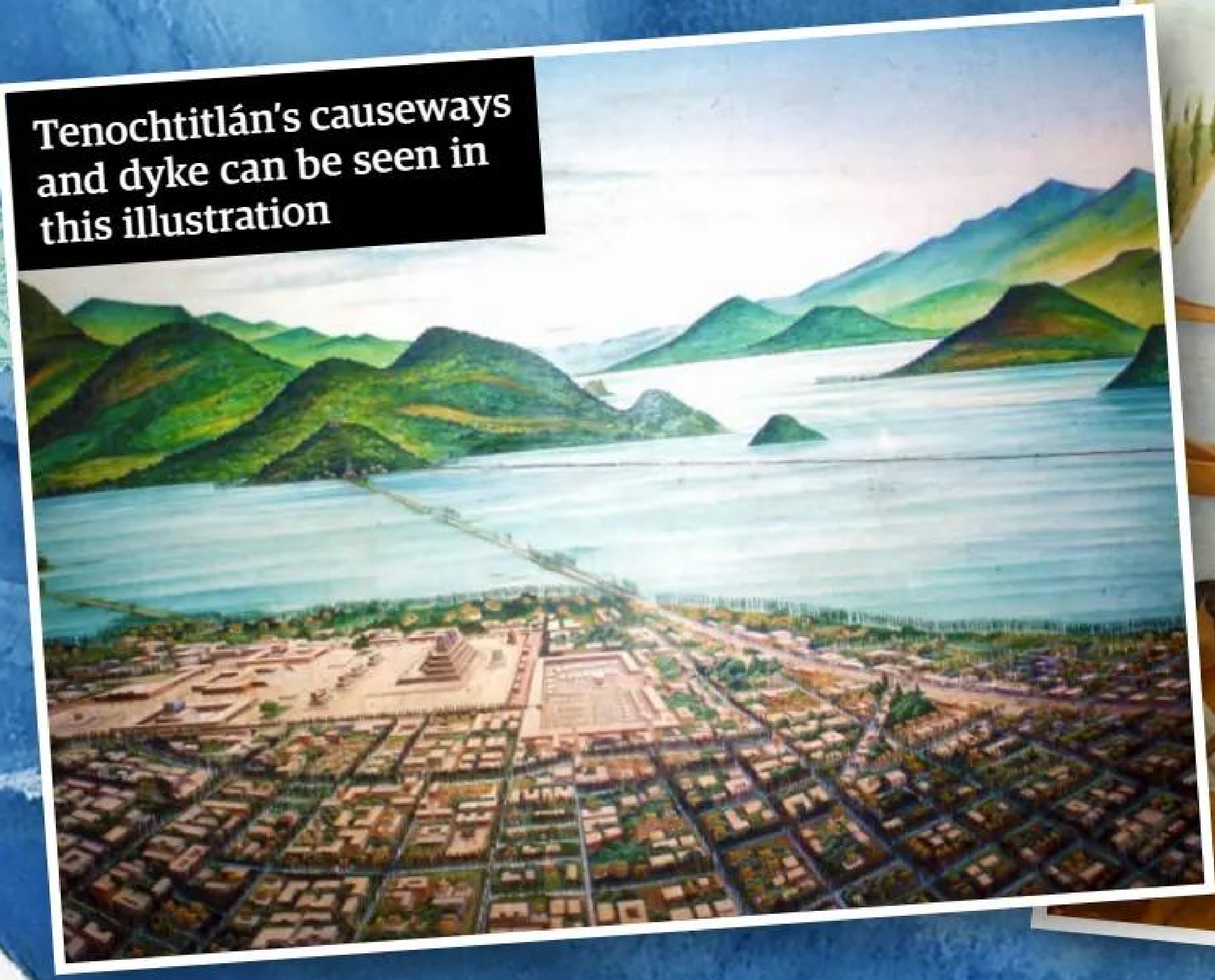
They could then delve into Tenochtitlán either on a bustling network of canals, or by the expansive avenues that ran east to west and north to south. These connected to a grid of narrow roads weaving their way through the residential districts, passing the mud-and-reed dwellings of commoners, stone flat-roof houses belonging to the wealthy, and opening up into vast marketplaces so large that tens of thousands could sell and barter in a day. With an estimated quarter of a million people living there at its peak, the city would have been a hive of activity and noise.

At its peak, Tenochtitlán was home to up to 200,000 people - bigger than most European cities at the time

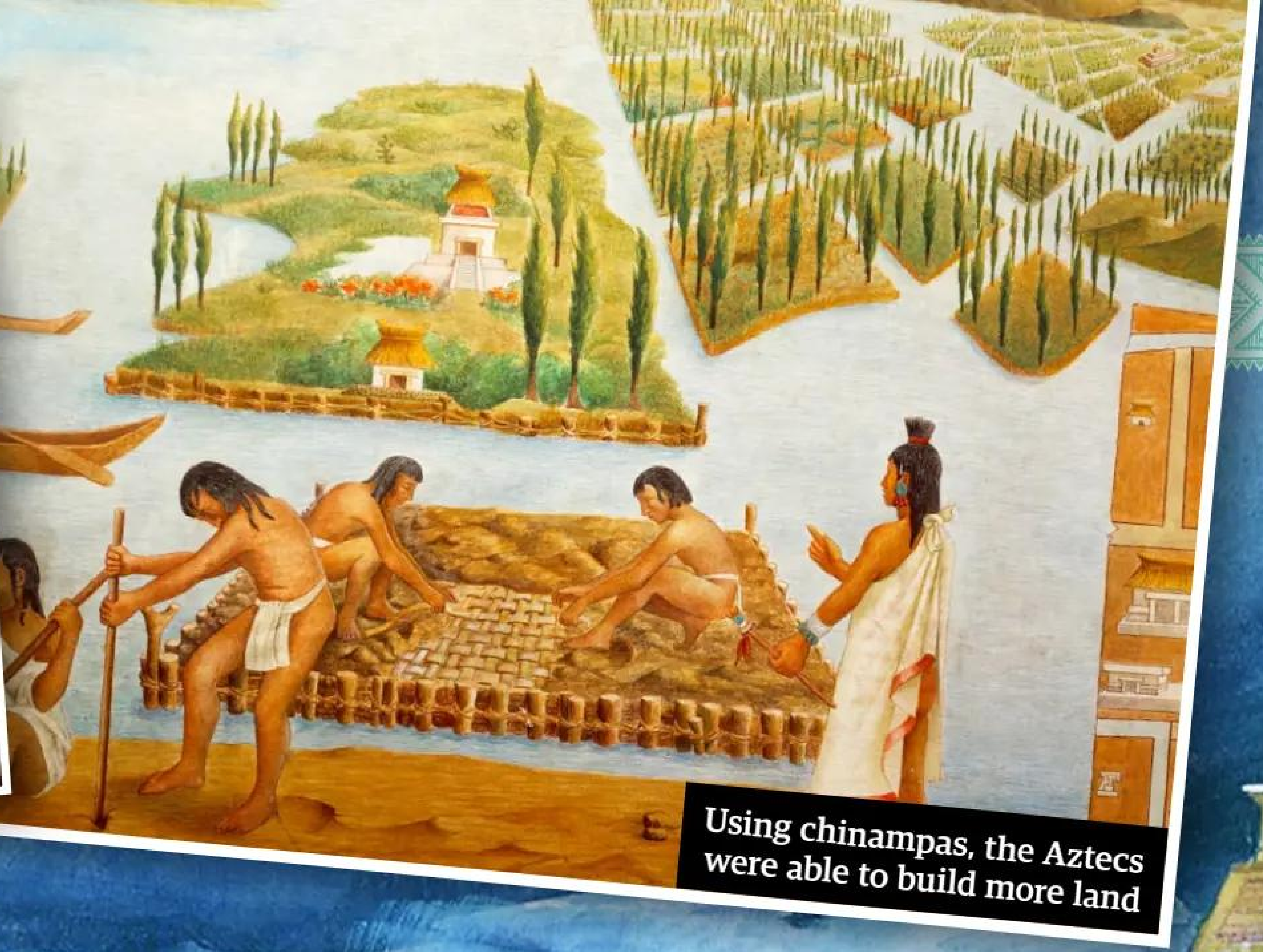
Everywhere would be temples, monuments and statues to the gods among the whitewashed buildings, which, as if to boast of how remarkably clean the metropolis was, glinted in the sunlight. None more so than the colossal structure that had dominated a person's view of Tenochtitlán from the first sighting: a 60-metre high pyramid. It towered over the Sacred Precinct, a complex of religious buildings and palaces, and was where tens of thousands would be taken for human sacrifice. It was a temple in the heart of a city, and they were both fit for the gods.

There was not just nothing like Tenochtitlán in Mesoamerica; there were not many places around the world at the time to match the Aztec capital. And it rose to this height - before swiftly collapsing again - within two centuries. As the legend goes, the Mexica people, having left their ancestral home of Aztlan, came from the north in search of a place to live until they reached Lake Texcoco in central Mexico. On an island near the western shore, they saw an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus and eating a snake, which they believed to be a sign from Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, marking where a city was destined to be built. It was founded in 1325 and named Tenochtitlán.

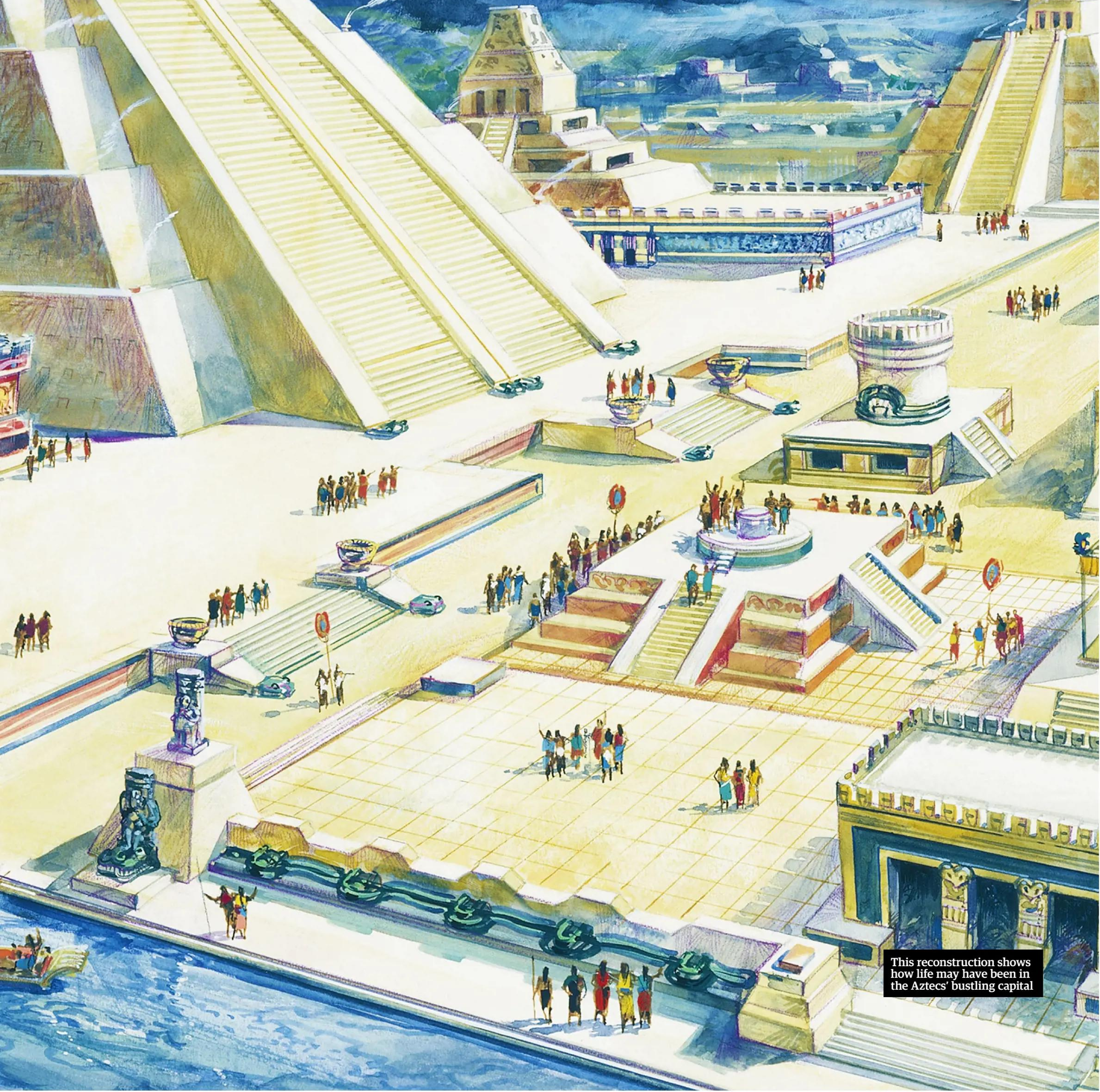
Despite the heavenly signs, though, the island was not an encouraging destination for a new home. In the early years, the Mexica, now known as the Aztecs, struggled with the swampy conditions, lived in small huts and argued



Tenochtitlán's causeways and dyke can be seen in this illustration



Using chinampas, the Aztecs were able to build more land



This reconstruction shows how life may have been in the Aztecs' bustling capital

> "In large, open-air squares, goods were organised into sections – from foods to exotic items like feathers"

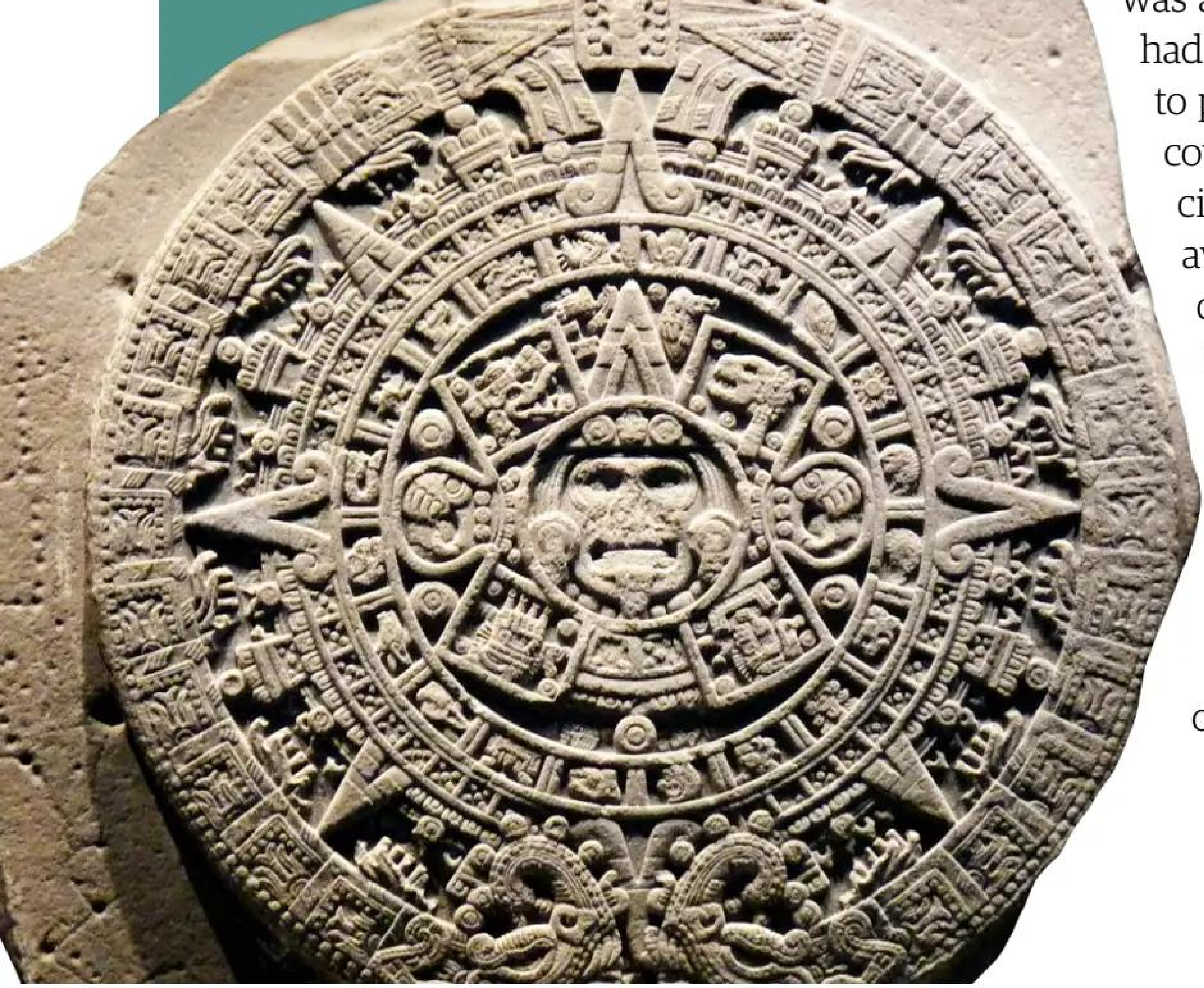
Secrets of the Sun Stone

How Tenochtitlán's precious artefact gives us clues to the Aztecs

A treasure trove of artefacts has been retrieved from under the ground of Mexico City, but perhaps nothing as iconic as the Sun Stone. Around three and a half metres in diameter and weighing 24 tons, the volcanic basalt carving had been buried by the Spanish following the fall of Tenochtitlán. It was only uncovered again in 1790.

The intricate carvings, which would originally have been painted, depict the past ages of the world according to the Aztecs. In the centre is a grotesque face, believed to be of the sun god Tonatiuh, with a sacrificial knife for a tongue and possibly hearts in both hands. It joins with the four surrounding rectangles to form the glyph 'ollin', which means movement, the name that was given to this age. The Aztecs believed this to be the fifth age, or sun, of the world, after the previous four had ended with cataclysmic events.

The outer ring shows the symbols of the Aztec calendar, consisting of 365 days split into 18 months of 20 days each. That left five left over, which the Aztecs referred to as nemontemi, or useless days, and believed them to be unlucky. They also used a ritual calendar of 260 days, made up of 20 cycles of 13 days, with each one honouring a different god. As for the Sun Stone, now held at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, scholars are still trying to penetrate all its secrets. Its full and complex purpose remains shrouded in mystery.



The Sun Stone would have laid horizontally and may have been anointed with sacrificial blood

endlessly among themselves, which led to a dissident group splitting from the leadership and forming a settlement of its own on another island, and it became known as Tlatelolco. The young nation of Tenochtitlán also fell under the dominion of the chief power in the region, the Tepanecs, to whom they had to pay tribute for decades.

Yet Tenochtitlán and its people thrived throughout the 14th century, growing so powerful that it became independent during the rule of its fourth king, Itzcoatl. By forging an alliance with two other states, Texcoco and Tlacopan, he laid the foundations of what would become the Aztec Empire as Tenochtitlán began seizing lands from defeated foes and bringing in its own tributes. Such success meant more people came to the city and the island proved too small for demands of an increasing population. The Aztecs therefore expanded by building artificial islands.

This vase, found at Templo Mayor, depicts the rain god Tlaloc

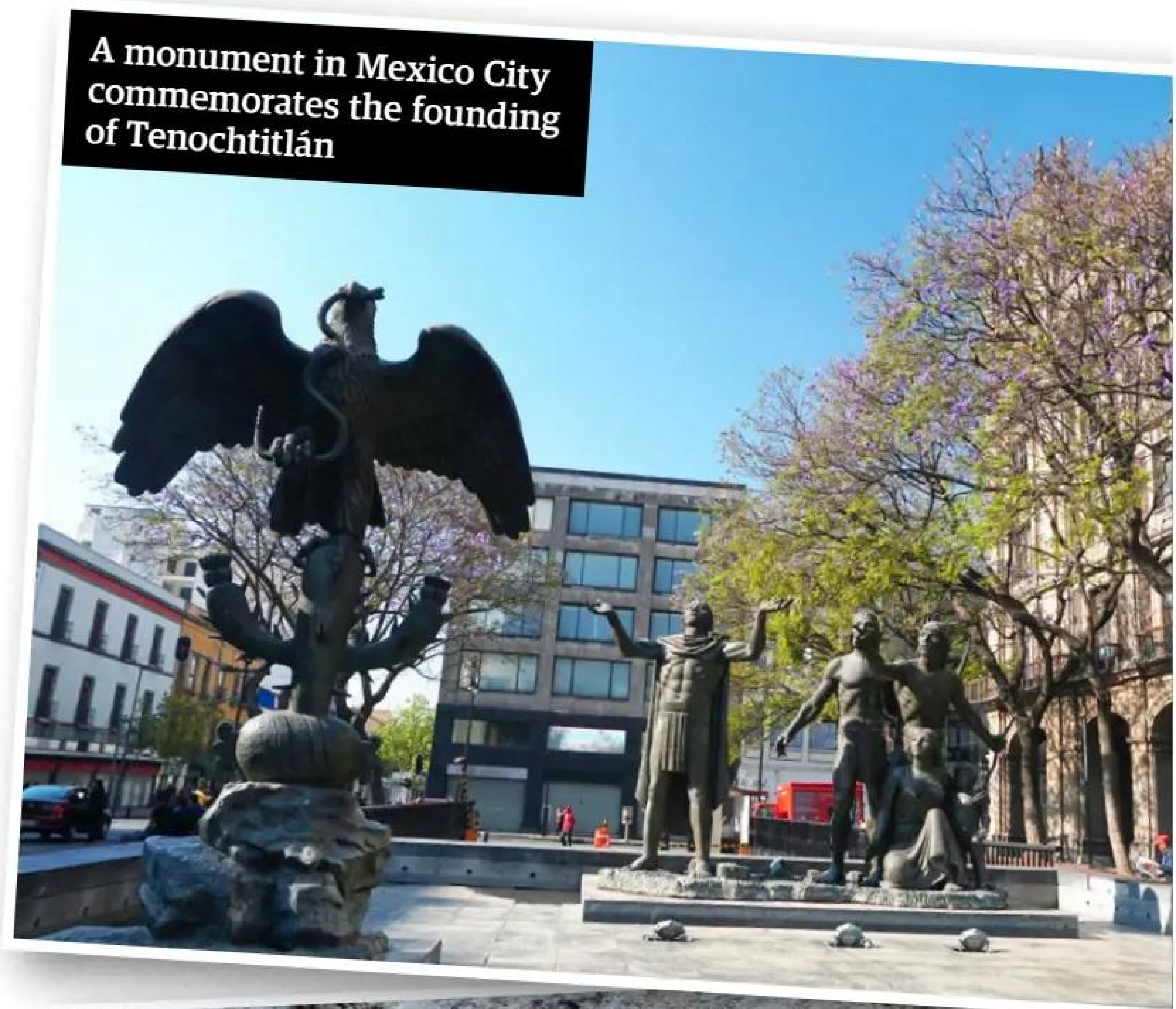
They hammered stakes into the shallow lake bed and lashed them together tightly with reeds to create solid walls. The space could then be packed with rocks and earth, including highly fertile muds from below the surface, to create floating plots of land around 30 metres long and with gaps for canoes to travel in between them. Through this form of agriculture, called chinampas, the farmers had bountiful harvests of corn, peppers, beans, tomatoes, pumpkins, apples and vanilla, among other crops. Flowers were also successful, making the floating gardens colourful and fragrant.

By building more land, Tenochtitlán grew to cover around five square miles at its largest. It was accessible only by the causeways, which had bridges at regular intervals to allow canoes to pass. These provided security too as they could be raised during an attack. The enlarged city was divided into quarters by wide avenues running from the centre to the three causeways to the north, south and west and the docks to the east. These would then have around 15 to 20 districts, or calpulli, each with autonomous powers and their own temples, schools and marketplaces.

The markets were a key contributor to the economy, as well as offering a social space. In large, open-air squares, goods were organised into sections – from foods to exotic items like feathers, pelts, musical instruments and precious metals – and bartered. Highly valued cacao could be used as currency. The largest market was at Tlatelolco, the other island state, which was conquered in 1474 and absorbed into the physically expanding city. According to possibly exaggerated accounts, the Tlatelolco market could hold up to 60,000 people.

The choice of goods on offer at the markets was boosted by trade with other civilisations, carried out by the pochteca, or travelling merchants. Although commoners, they were influential figures used to carry messages across the empire. Tenochtitlán had a complicated social hierarchy, but generally there were four classes: the ruler and his family; nobles made of government officials, priests and high-ranking military; commoners; and slaves, usually prisoners of war or criminals. Aztecs could offer themselves, or even their children, as slaves to pay off a debt. A person's class dictated the kind of house they could have, as only the wealthy could build with stone materials, and only nobles were permitted to have a second storey.

Considering its size, Tenochtitlán was kept extremely clean as refuse was collected and taken away every single day. The Aztecs kept themselves clean too with daily baths, if not



A monument in Mexico City commemorates the founding of Tenochtitlán

The bones of thousands of sacrificial victims have been found

Statues of the gods at the remains of Templo Mayor

several. Fresh water was ample, especially after the rule of Moctezuma I in the mid-15th century, when aqueducts were constructed between the city and the hills surrounding Lake Texcoco. Water flowed along a pair of terracotta-lined pipes on the causeways, meaning one could be repaired without supply being halted. It is thought that their architect, Nezahualcoyotl, also built a dyke eight to ten miles long to keep the waters around the island fresh from the saltier lake beyond.

The most impressive structures, however, were in the Sacred Precinct, at the heart of Tenochtitlán. Among the dozens of buildings, some accounts say as many as 78, were many temples, including the round tower dedicated to the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl, mansions for nobles and dignitaries, and royal palaces. The immense complex of the ninth emperor, Moctezuma II, included a zoo, aviary, aquarium and botanical gardens.

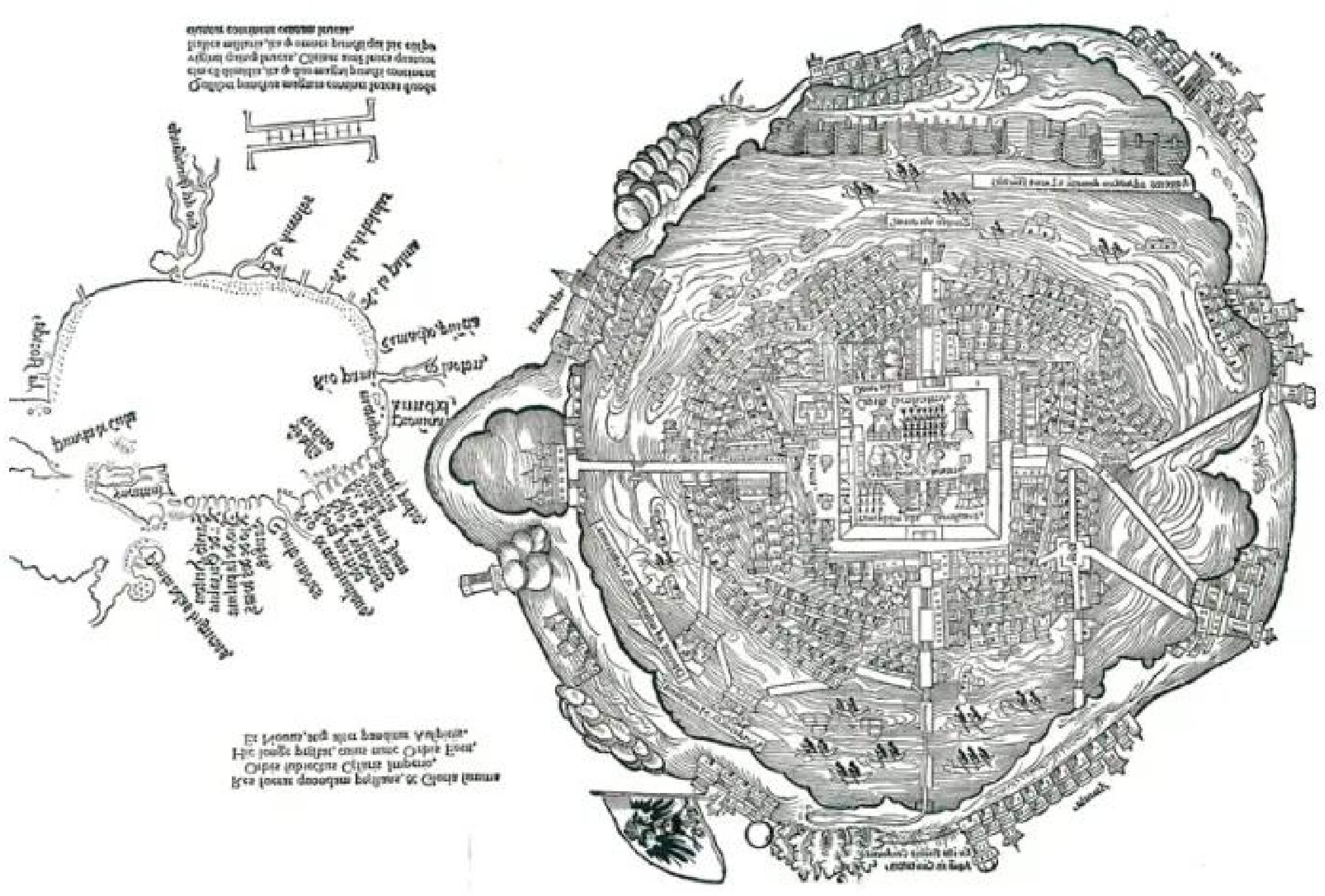
Next to the temples was another building similarly endowed with religious significance, but it was not for worshipping: the playing court for the ball game ullamaliztli. It was played on a court, or tlachtli, shaped like a capital I, surrounded by high walls and with two stone rings on either side. A team would try and get a hard rubber ball through them, without using their hands or feet, so they had to throw their bodies around to keep the ball in the air with any other body part. The sport represented the heavenly battle of the Sun against the night so, as well as being gambled on heavily, it was a revered feature in society.

All the buildings in the Sacred Precinct were in the shadow of the chief temple, a pyramid that the Aztecs referred to as Huie Teocalli, but better known by the Spanish name Templo Mayor. It was actually a twin pyramid, meeting at a single massive platform, with each shrine dedicated to a different god. The south-side pyramid honoured the god of war, Huitzilopochtli, and had steps painted red, while its northern counterpart was for Tlaloc, god of rain and fertility, and was reached by steps of blue and white.

Countless sacrifices took place at Templo Mayor, often by cutting out the victim's heart with an obsidian blade. There could be so many – at the four-day opening ceremony in 1487, some 4,000 prisoners of war were sacrificed – that the blood would trickle down the temple walls and the bodies thrown unceremoniously down the steps. Next to the pyramid were the tzompantli, or skull racks. The more lands the Aztecs conquered, the more prisoners they would have to sacrifice. They even started wars with the sole intention of claiming bodies to offer to the gods.

By the early 16th century, the empire had spread over most of central Mexico, covering hundreds of states and millions of people. And everything was controlled from Tenochtitlán, a prosperous megacity of the age, twice the size of London. For nearly 200 years, it was the centre of Aztec economy, military, arts, culture, religion and sacrifice, which literally kept the Sun rising. Tenochtitlán would leave the Spanish in awe, but would fall to their greed all the same and be destroyed. But a new settlement would rise in its place: Mexico City.

Published in 1524, this map of Tenochtitlán was the first image of the city seen in Europe



How the Spanish saw Tenochtitlán

Cortés and his conquistadors witnessed the city at its peak and oversaw its destruction

When Hernán Cortés and his men first saw Tenochtitlán in 1519, they were staggered by its size, structure and sophistication. "Gazing on such wonderful sights, we did not know what to say, or whether what appeared before us was real," wrote conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo. He said that some of the men asked if what they were seeing "was not a dream".

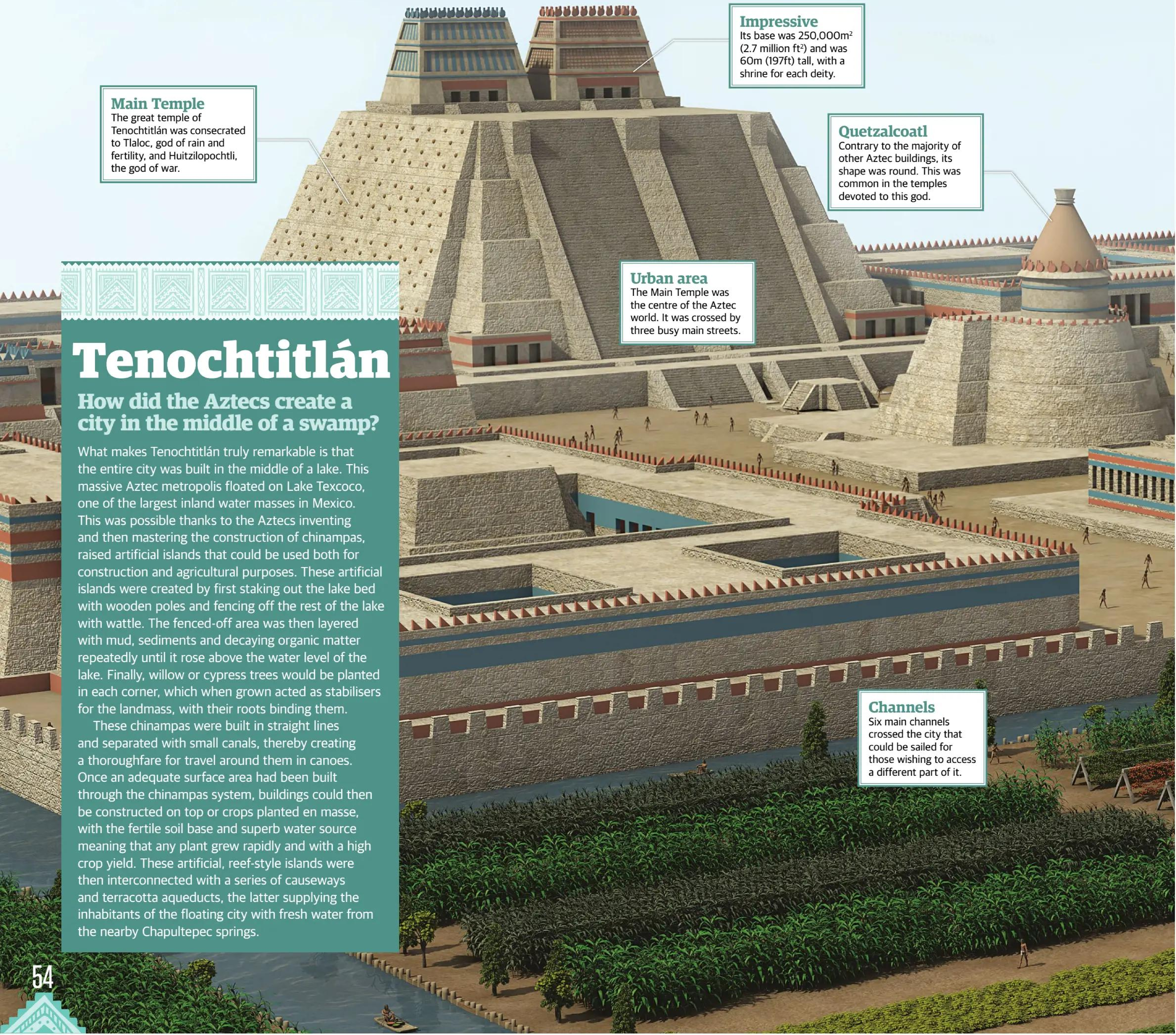
When the Spanish were welcomed into the city and allowed to explore, Díaz was able to see the grand marketplace at Tlatelolco: "We were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise… and at the good order and control that was maintained, for we had never seen such a thing before." Cortés was similarly impressed by Tenochtitlán, and wrote of its wonders to the king of Spain Charles I, claiming it to be as big as Seville or Córdoba.

Yet the Spanish saw something in the city that filled them disgust: human sacrifice. "The walls of that shrine were so splashed and caked with blood that they and the floor too were black… the stench was worse than that of any slaughterhouse in Spain," wrote Díaz. They exaggerated the Aztecs' barbarity to make them look more savage – once claiming that more than 80,000 were sacrificed to honour Templo Mayor when the real figure was nearer 4,000 – and also to justify their crusade to convert the Aztecs to Christianity. After the conquest, Tenochtitlán was destroyed, the lake drained and a new city established.

The remains of Templo Mayor can be seen in Mexico City

© Alamy, Getty Images

Great Tenochtitlán



Main Temple
The great temple of Tenochtitlán was consecrated to Tlaloc, god of rain and fertility, and Huitzilopochtli, the god of war.

Impressive
Its base was 250,000m² (2.7 million ft²) and was 60m (197ft) tall, with a shrine for each deity.

Quetzalcoatl
Contrary to the majority of other Aztec buildings, its shape was round. This was common in the temples devoted to this god.

Urban area
The Main Temple was the centre of the Aztec world. It was crossed by three busy main streets.

Channels
Six main channels crossed the city that could be sailed for those wishing to access a different part of it.

Tenochtitlán

How did the Aztecs create a city in the middle of a swamp?

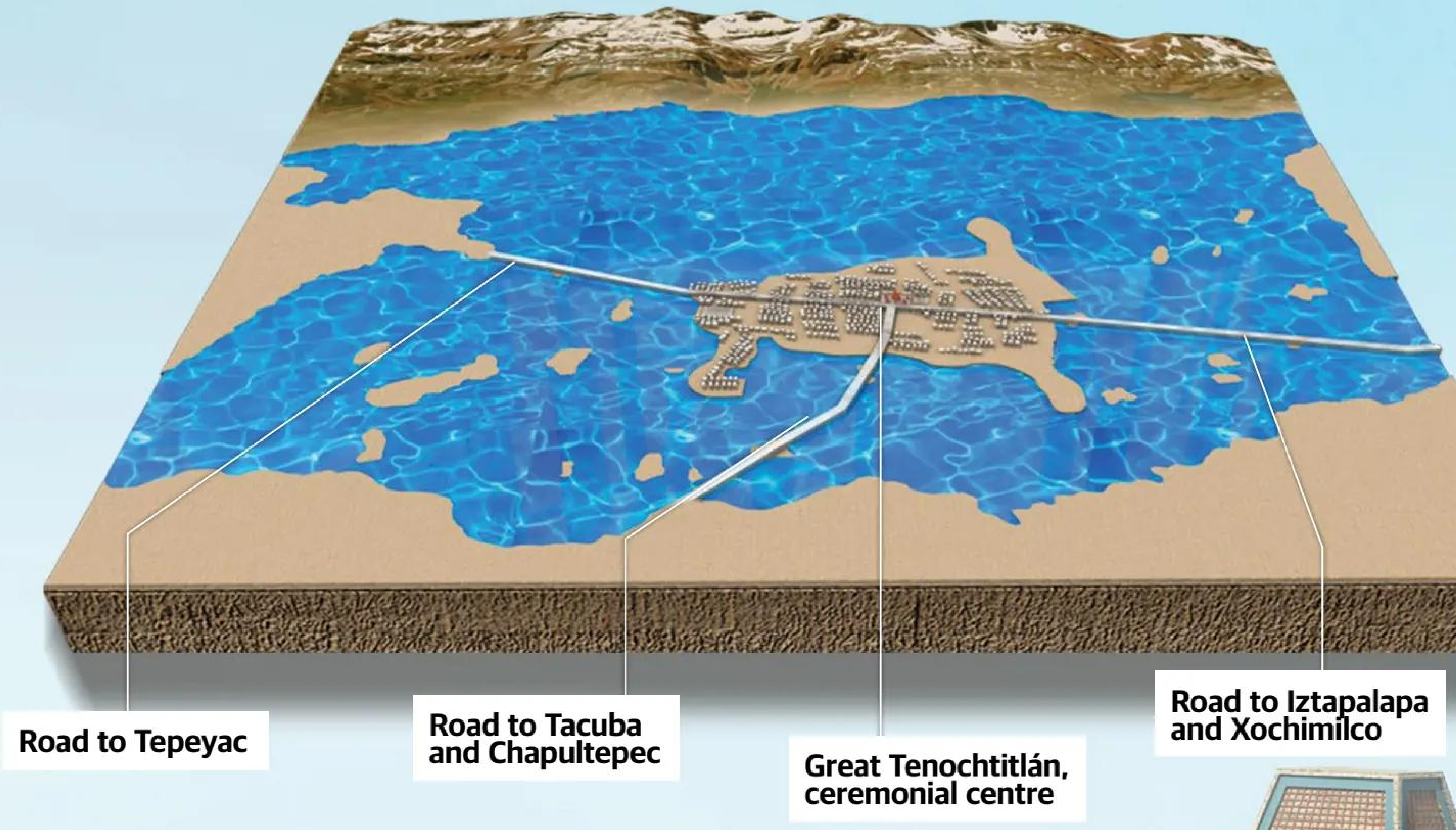
What makes Tenochtitlán truly remarkable is that the entire city was built in the middle of a lake. This massive Aztec metropolis floated on Lake Texcoco, one of the largest inland water masses in Mexico. This was possible thanks to the Aztecs inventing and then mastering the construction of chinampas, raised artificial islands that could be used both for construction and agricultural purposes. These artificial islands were created by first staking out the lake bed with wooden poles and fencing off the rest of the lake with wattle. The fenced-off area was then layered with mud, sediments and decaying organic matter repeatedly until it rose above the water level of the lake. Finally, willow or cypress trees would be planted in each corner, which when grown acted as stabilisers for the landmass, with their roots binding them.

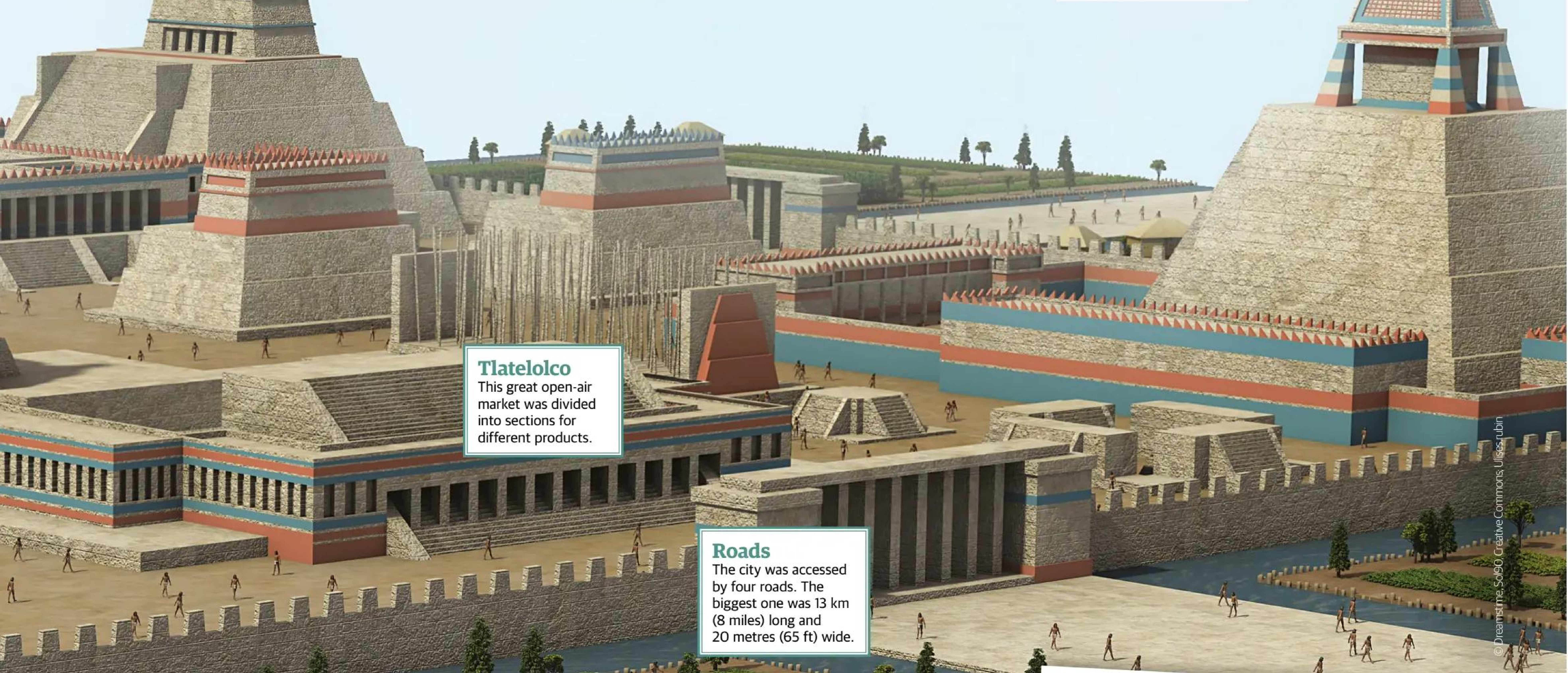
These chinampas were built in straight lines and separated with small canals, thereby creating a thoroughfare for travel around them in canoes. Once an adequate surface area had been built through the chinampas system, buildings could then be constructed on top or crops planted en masse, with the fertile soil base and superb water source meaning that any plant grew rapidly and with a high crop yield. These artificial, reef-style islands were then interconnected with a series of causeways and terracotta aqueducts, the latter supplying the inhabitants of the floating city with fresh water from the nearby Chapultepec springs.

Towards 1325, the Aztec settled in the region of the Texcoco lake, south of Mexico valley. They built the city of Tenochtitlán on a long islet that reached a population of more than 200,000 inhabitants, the double of any European city of the time. The city was enlarged towards the nearby islands. It was divided into four neighbourhoods where the twenty clans or calpulli, that grouped the Aztec families, were distributed. Each calpulli was relatively autonomous; it had its own temples, schools and markets. Tens of canals crossed the city sailed by 50,000 reed boats every day and crossed by wooden bridges that were removed at night.

Location

The capital above the Texcoco lake


Road to Tepeyac
Road to Tacuba and Chapultepec
Great Tenochtitlán, ceremonial centre
Road to Iztapalapa and Xochimilco



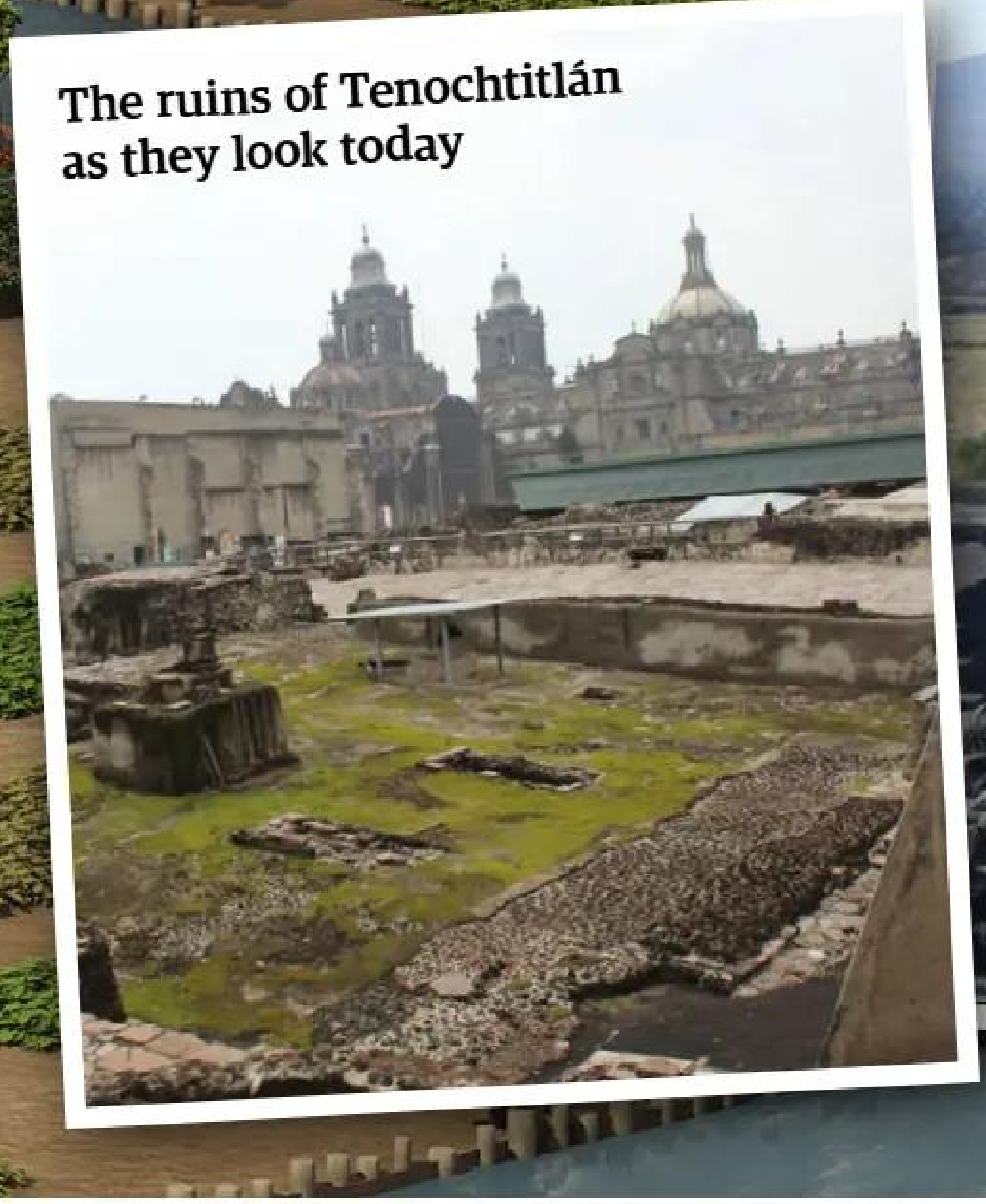
Tlatelolco
This great open-air market was divided into sections for different products.

Roads
The city was accessed by four roads. The biggest one was 13 km (8 miles) long and 20 metres (65 ft) wide.

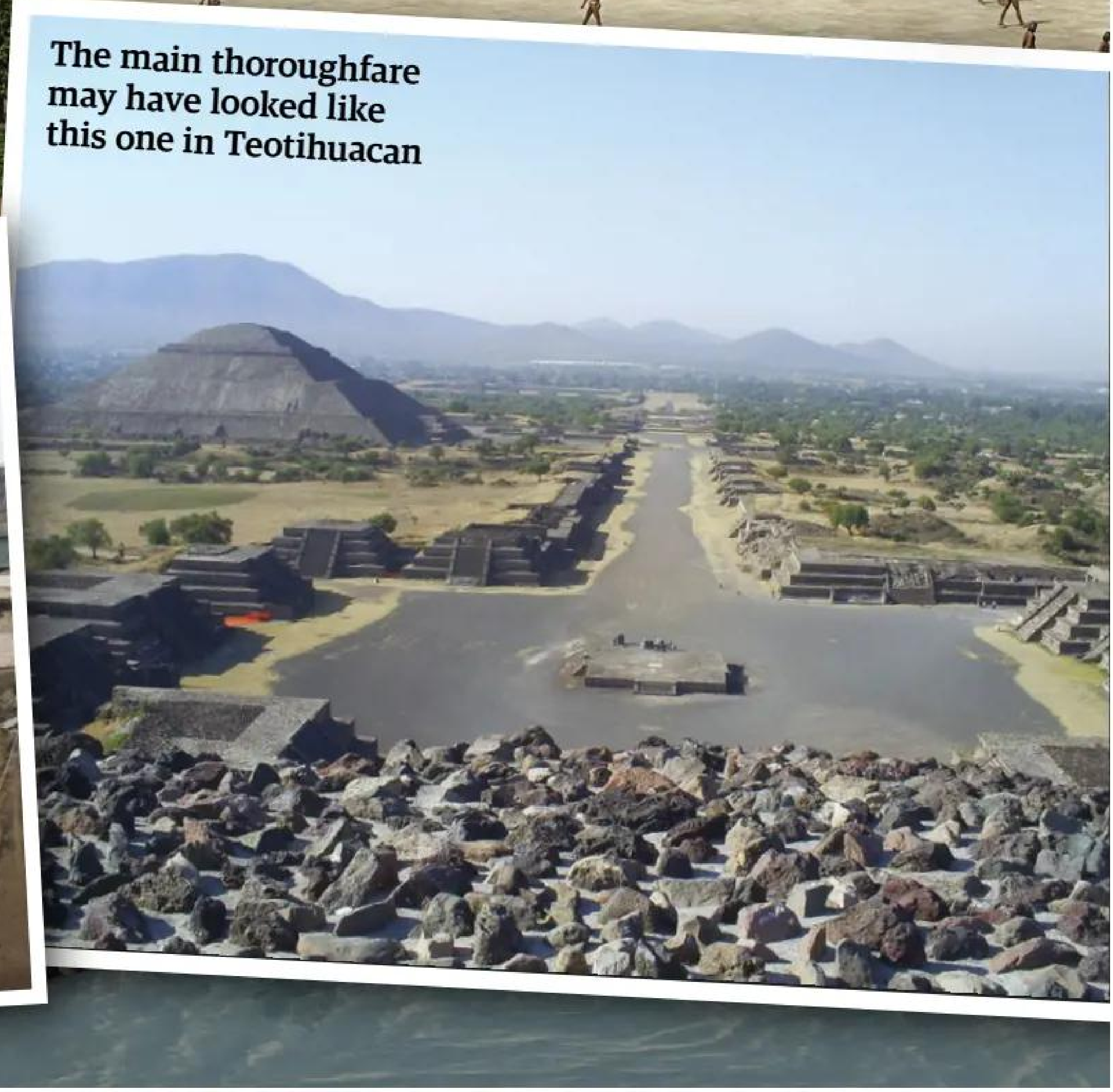
Houses
Most of dwellings in the city were simple, single-storey houses. They were very different from the large and imposing temples.

Chinampas
These were artificial floating gardens that served to grow a variety of produce, including corn, pumpkins, pepper, cocoa, beans, apples, tomatoes and vanilla.

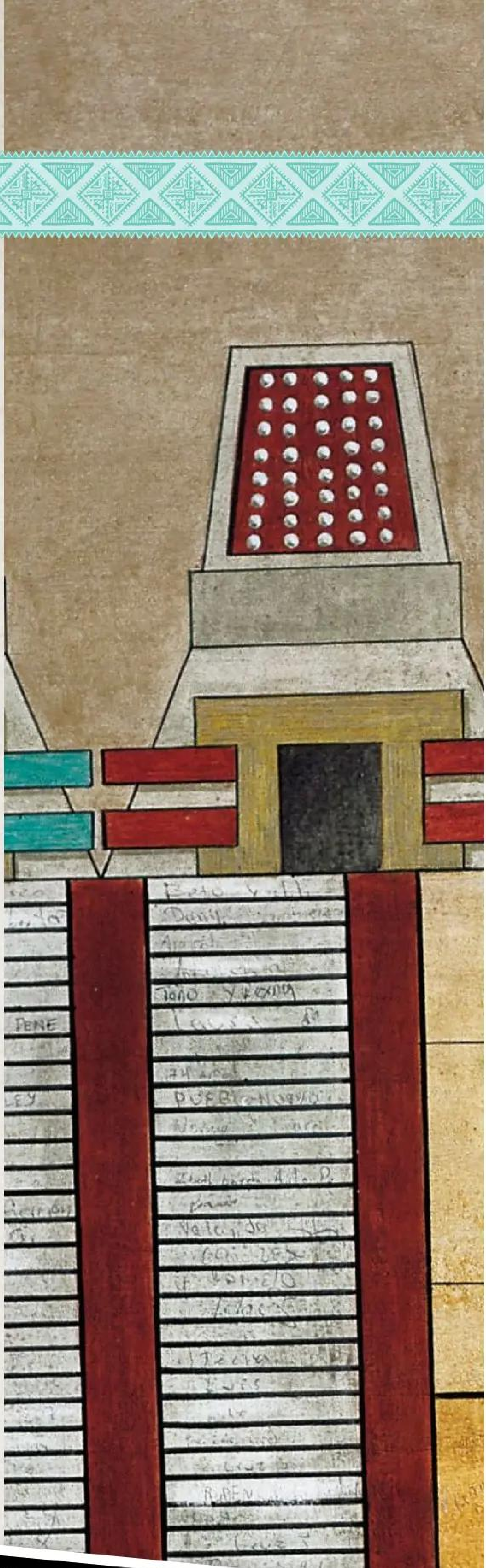
© Dreamstime, Sol90, Creative Commons, Ulises rubin



The ruins of Tenochtitlán as they look today



The main thoroughfare may have looked like this one in Teotihuacan



Politics of the Pyramid

Aztec society was highly stratified, with the king at the top of the pyramid - and slaves at the bottom

Written by Will Lawrence

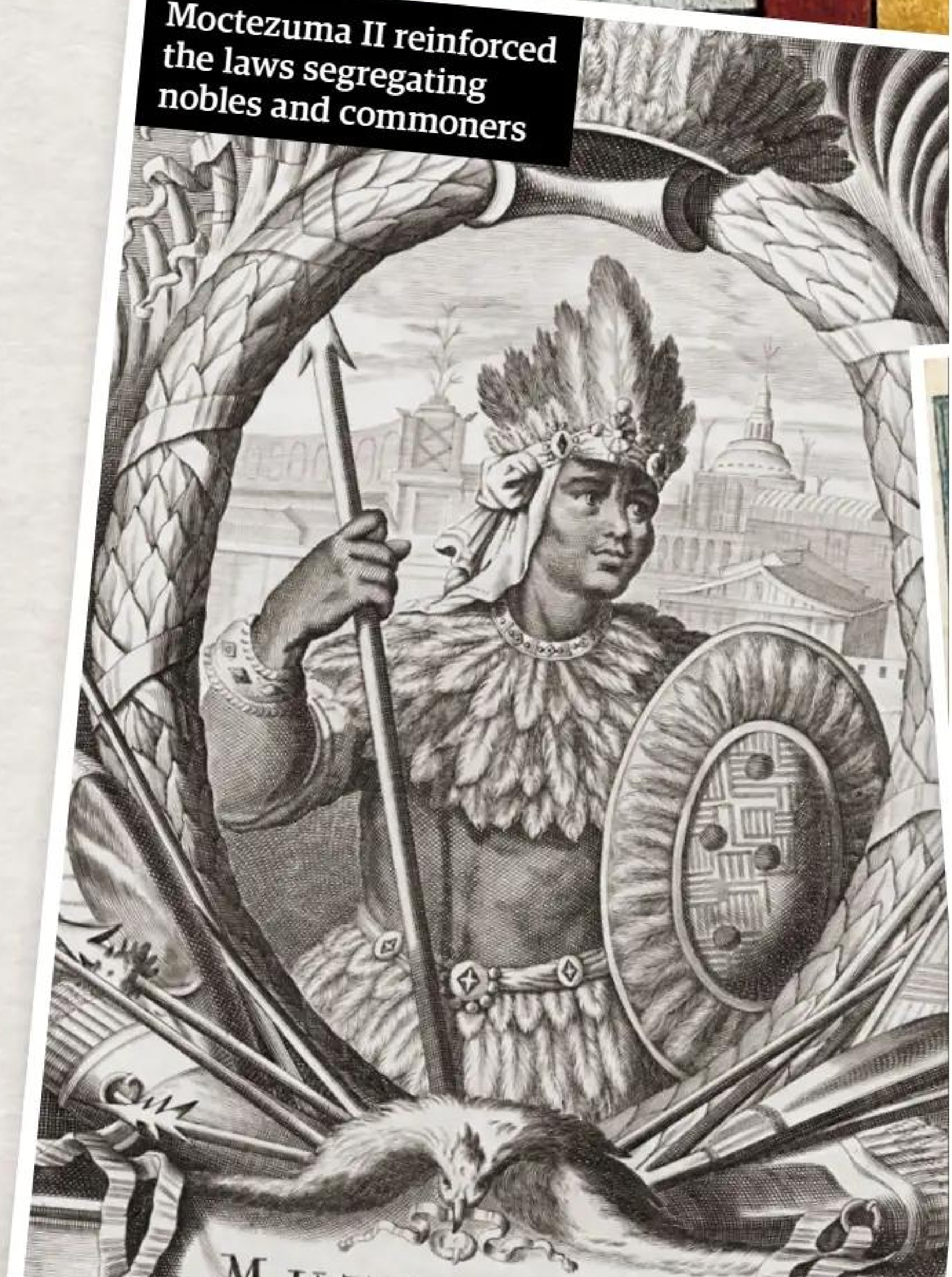
Aztec society was characterised by a strict social stratification and was wholly dominated by its ruling class, with the kings sitting at the top of the pyramid. The kings were responsible for almost everything that unfolded within their state, whether that involved religious ritual, war, governance, even street cleaning, dancing and the playing of ritual games. The history of these kings, meanwhile, was often beset by intrigue and assassination, family ambition, feud, fire and conquest.

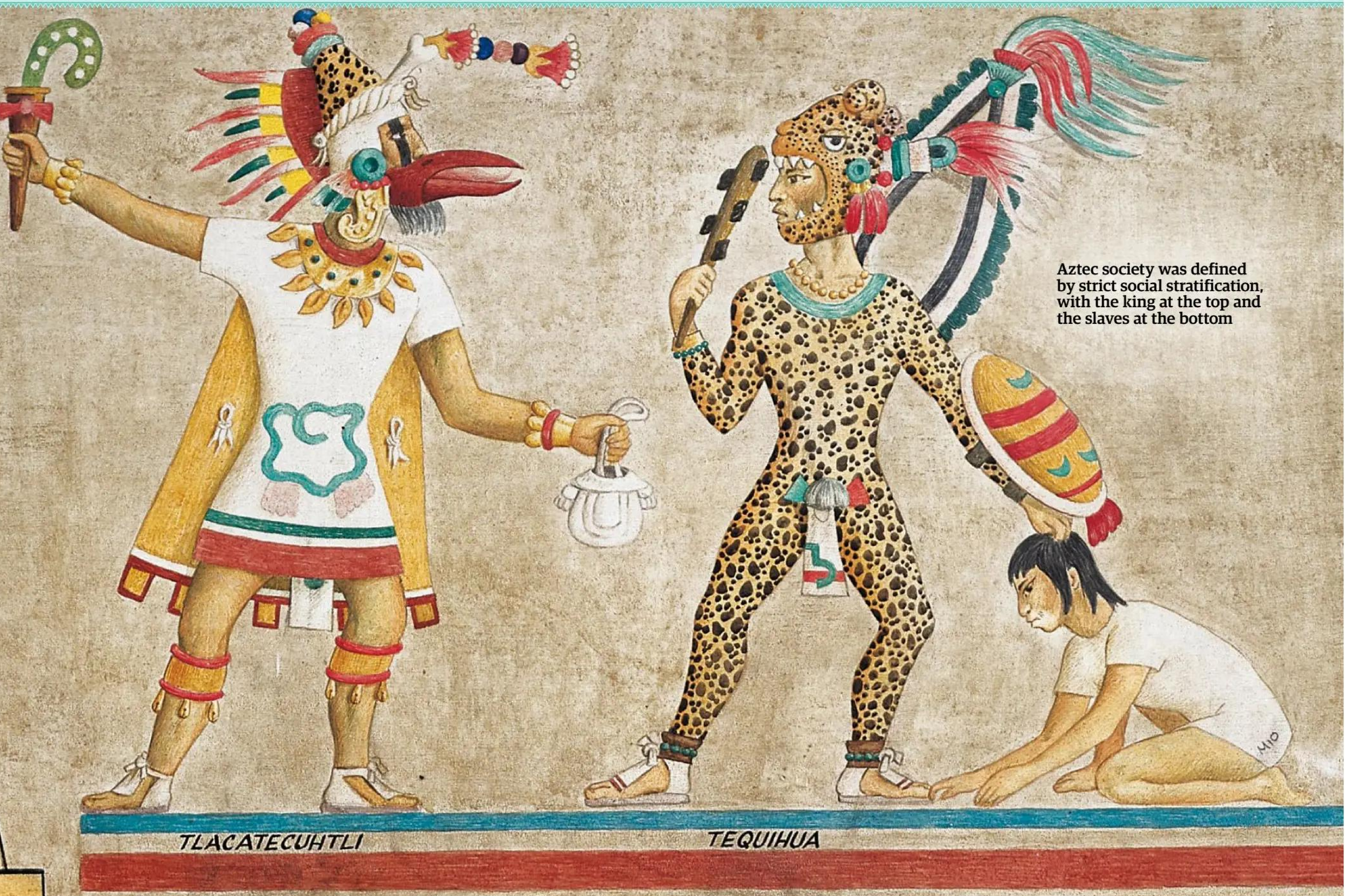
The Aztec kings ruled the city states that spread across the valley of Mexico and the surrounding highlands. By the time the Spaniards arrived in 1519, the vast majority of these city states were under the control of the Aztec Empire, and there was a noticeable uniformity in their social structure and architectural embodiment. Each state was centred on its royal palace, temple pyramid and market, with the palace not only the home of the king but also the centre of administration, the focus of social activity, and the home of an idol representing the patron god who kept watch over the locale.

The king was selected by a high council of nobles drawn from the male family of the previous incumbent, and while a brother or son usually succeeded a deceased ruler, sometimes a more distant relative emerged victorious, such as a cousin, nephew or grandson. Quite often a newly appointed king had proved himself a valiant champion and war leader in a recent clash of arms, and he was always considered the choice of Tezcatlipoca, the mightiest of the Aztec gods. After a period of ceremony and meditation he was required to lead a military excursion to capture prisoners for sacrifice.

The king lived a life of luxury, clad in the finest attire - manuscript illustrations show kings wearing a pointed crown - and he dined on the most delicate foods. He owned or at least controlled all the land within his city state and received tax payments from commoners and nobles alike. As the voice of Tezcatlipoca he led religious ceremonies and state rituals, while as war chief he would administer campaigns of conquest and defence, often leading his troops in battle. Indeed, according to the Franciscan friar and ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún, the ruler attended to war, conquest, death, singing, ball games, the market, the installation of lords, battling famine and plague, ensuring payments to the gods, guarding the city and removing its filth, sweeping and the assembling of warriors. He also resolved any disputes that could not be settled through the judicial process.

The last point is especially pertinent. There was a process of governance; the Aztecs were not subjects of an autocratic tyrant who ruled with absolute power. In Aztec society, a council of nobles listened to disputes among the commoners and


Moctezuma II reinforced the laws segregating nobles and commoners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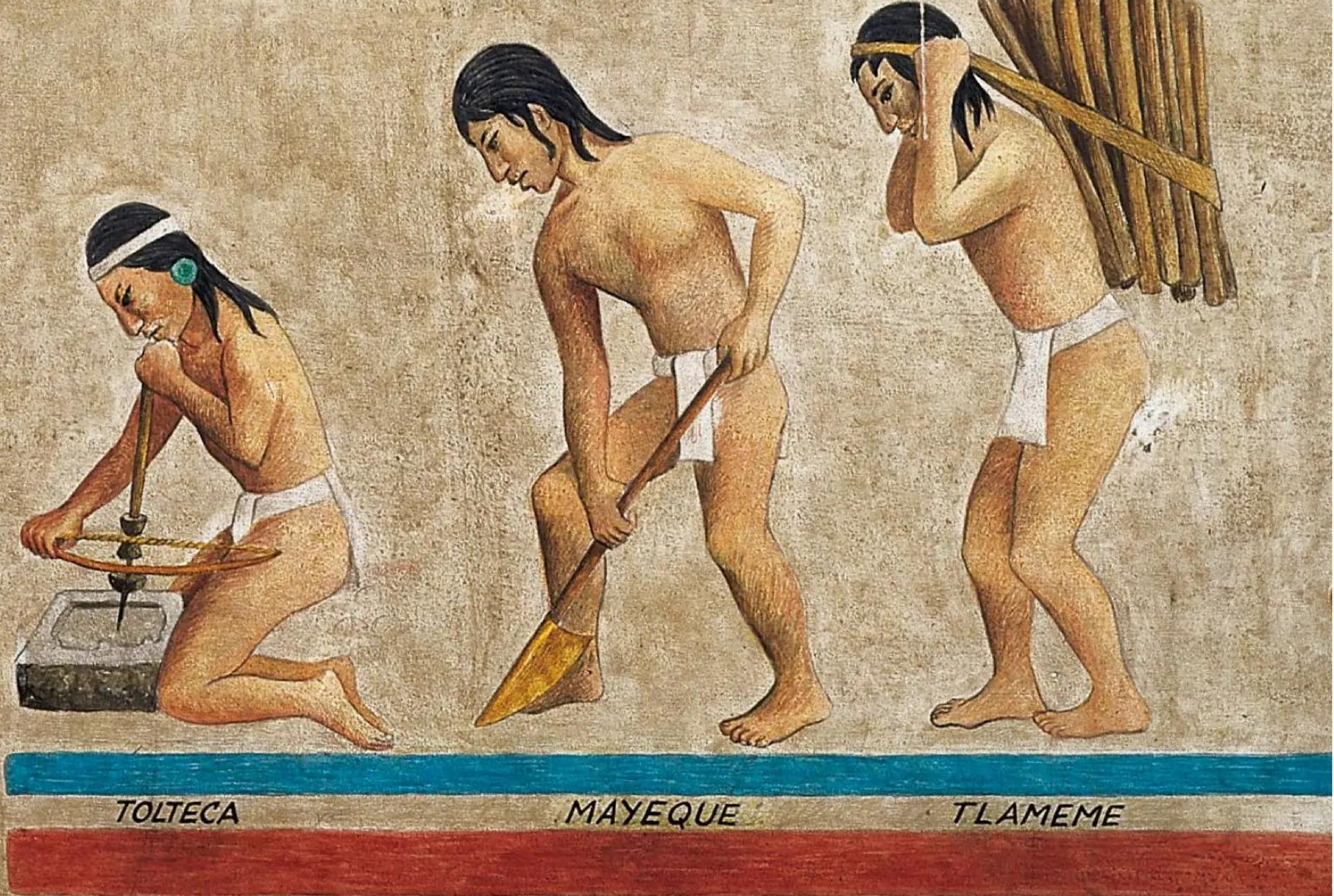
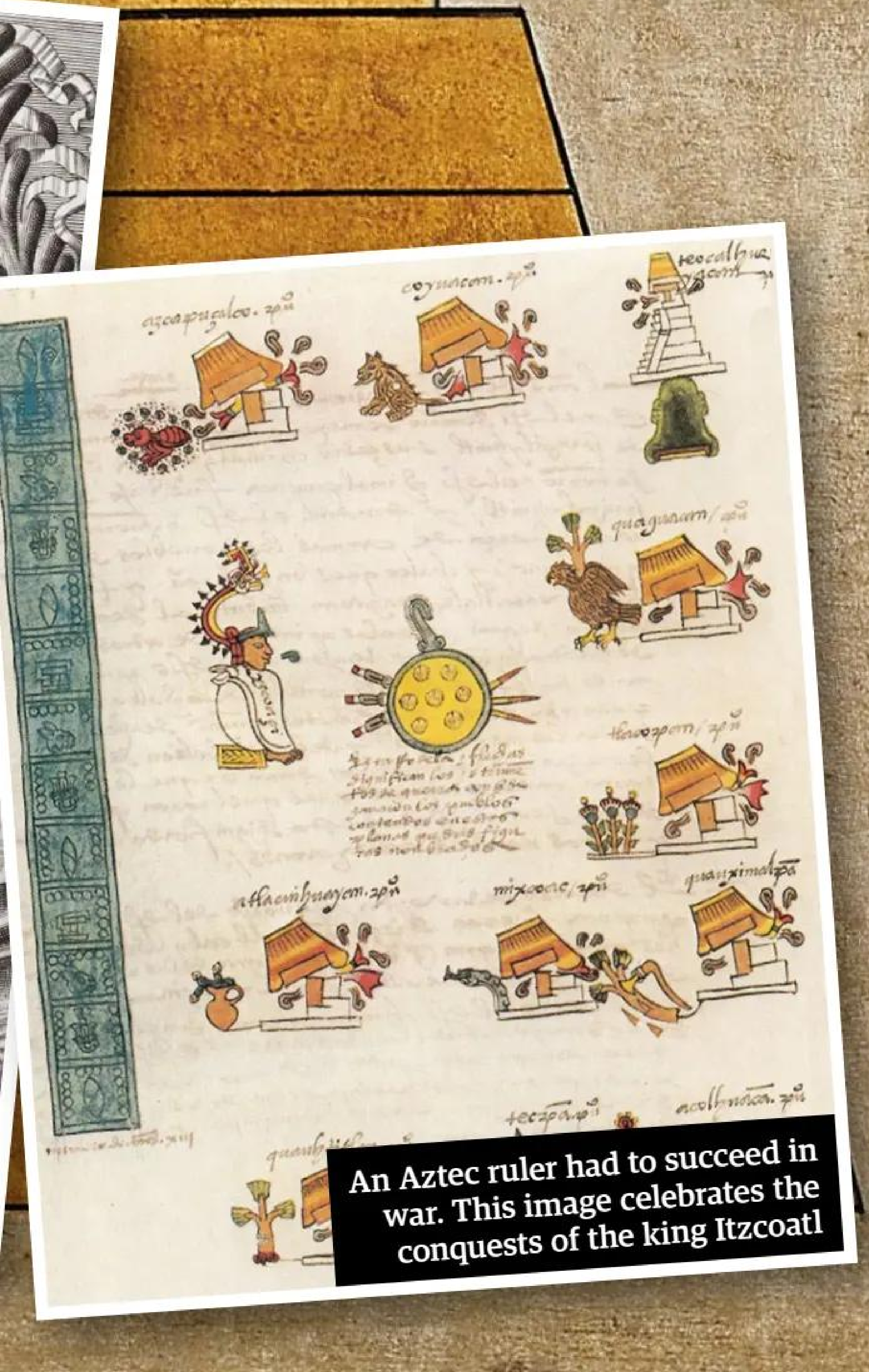
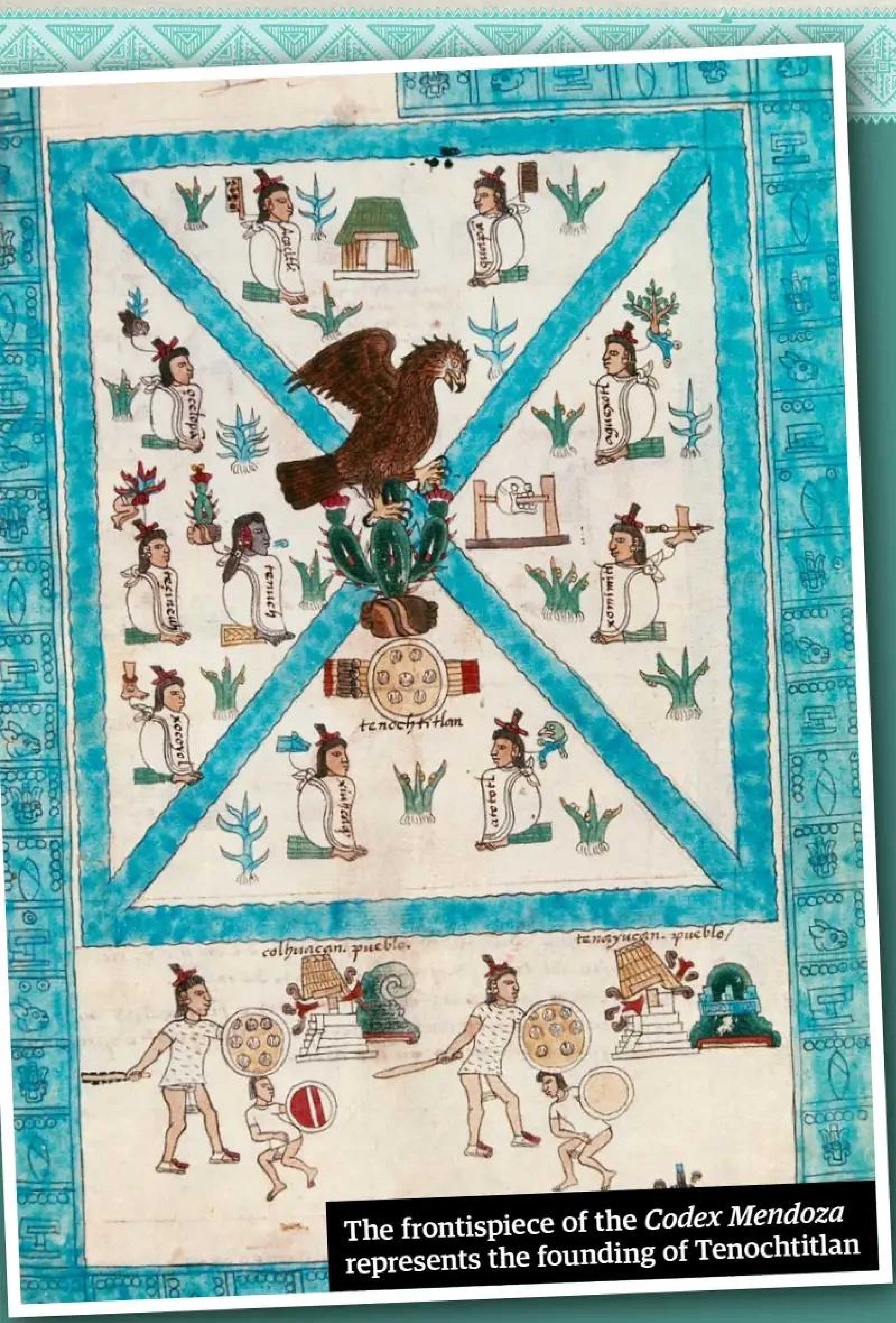

TOLTECA
MAYEQUE
TLAMEME

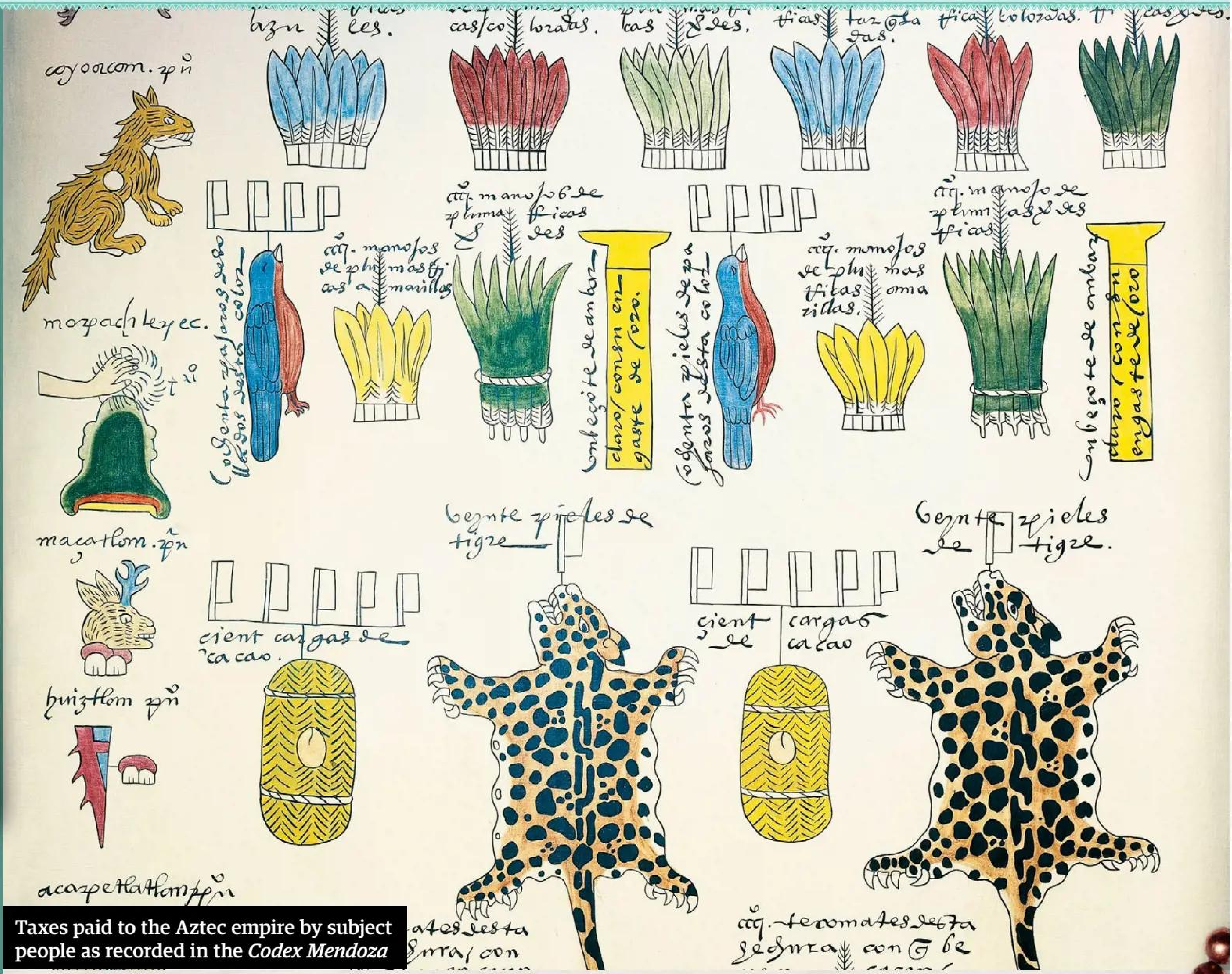
Aztec society was defined by strict social stratification, with the king at the top and the slaves at the bottom



An Aztec ruler had to succeed in war. This image celebrates the conquests of the king Itzcoatl



The frontispiece of the *Codex Mendoza* represents the founding of Tenochtitlan



Taxes paid to the Aztec empire by subject people as recorded in the *Codex Mendoza*

Aztec life: the Codex Mendoza

This manuscript's first pictorial folio reveals much about Aztec societal structure

Named after the viceroy who commissioned the work, the *Codex Mendoza* was created in the 1540s and shines a light on Aztec economic, political and social history. The frontispiece (see image above) is especially appropriate when looking at the social life of late Aztec society. The city of Tenochtitlan is represented by the central image of the eagle and cactus and it is then divided into four separate sections defined by the crossing blue lines.

Within these four sections are 10 seated figures, clearly of high birth. Nine of them are dressed in white robes and they wear their hair in a manner that signifies their prowess as warriors. Set apart by the colouring of his skin, his connection to a cactus that links to the central image, and by the speech glyph emanating from his mouth is a man called Tenuch. This is the ruler Tenuch, who reigned 1325-75 and his importance to the state religion is marked by signs of the priesthood – he wears his hair differently from the warrior-nobles around him and he sports smears of blood on his face.

The importance of martial achievements and history to the city are captured in the images at the bottom of the frontispiece. Here two Aztec warriors, wearing traditional quilted armour, tower over the defeated warriors of conquered cities. The temple imagery behind them demonstrates how important warfare was to the religious life of the city.

> "A carefully managed system recorded the tax that both commoners and nobles paid upwards in the social pyramid"

adjudicated on such matters. Royal councils also limited the king's powers and in some cases moved to depose an unfit or failing ruler. It is thought that the king Tizoc was assassinated by members of the royal household following a poor showing on the battlefield. An early Spanish governor, Alonso de Zorita, described in some detail the Aztec judiciary system and showed that it was designed to protect the rights of commoners. Further proof of non-autocratic governance appears in the complex but clearly organised tax system; the king did not just take from the people that which he desired. A carefully managed system recorded the tax that both commoners and nobles paid upwards in the social pyramid.

Below the king in this pyramid were the nobles and though they only comprised around five per cent of the total population, they enjoyed immense influence because their place in society was protected by rigid laws. Their position was ensured by hereditary succession and social mobility was almost entirely non-existent. If a noble's son was born on an auspicious day, the priesthood would forecast his future as a wealthy leader of men. If a commoner's son was born on the same day, the best he could hope for was a prediction of success as a warrior in service of the king and city state. Strict laws, meanwhile, restricted two-storey housing, expensive jewellery and highly decorated capes to the noble class. And while in theory all the land in a city state belonged to the king, he would grant large estates to high-born families, which would pass down the family line.

The highest-born families were known as the tecuhtli, and these men would often serve the king directly. Below these high-born nobles were the pipiltin, or lesser nobles, and they served their superiors and lived either within or near to their lord's palace. The nobility had access to the best jobs the state could offer, taking prestigious positions within the priesthood, the army when the state was at war, and the civil administration, where they worked as provincial governors, tax collectors, judges and ambassadors.

Their children, meanwhile, attended special schools, known as the calmecac (which also took common children of exceptional talent), and these were linked to a major temple, further connecting the nobility to the realm of religious worship. Here the children were groomed for a life in high service to the state and the king. They learned about astrology, warfare, religion, mechanics and they read beautifully illustrated books. The very youngest students spent a great deal of time in the temple with which the school was affiliated, training as novice priests. As the years passed they graduated into martial activity, joining the students from the commoners' school as they learned the art of war.

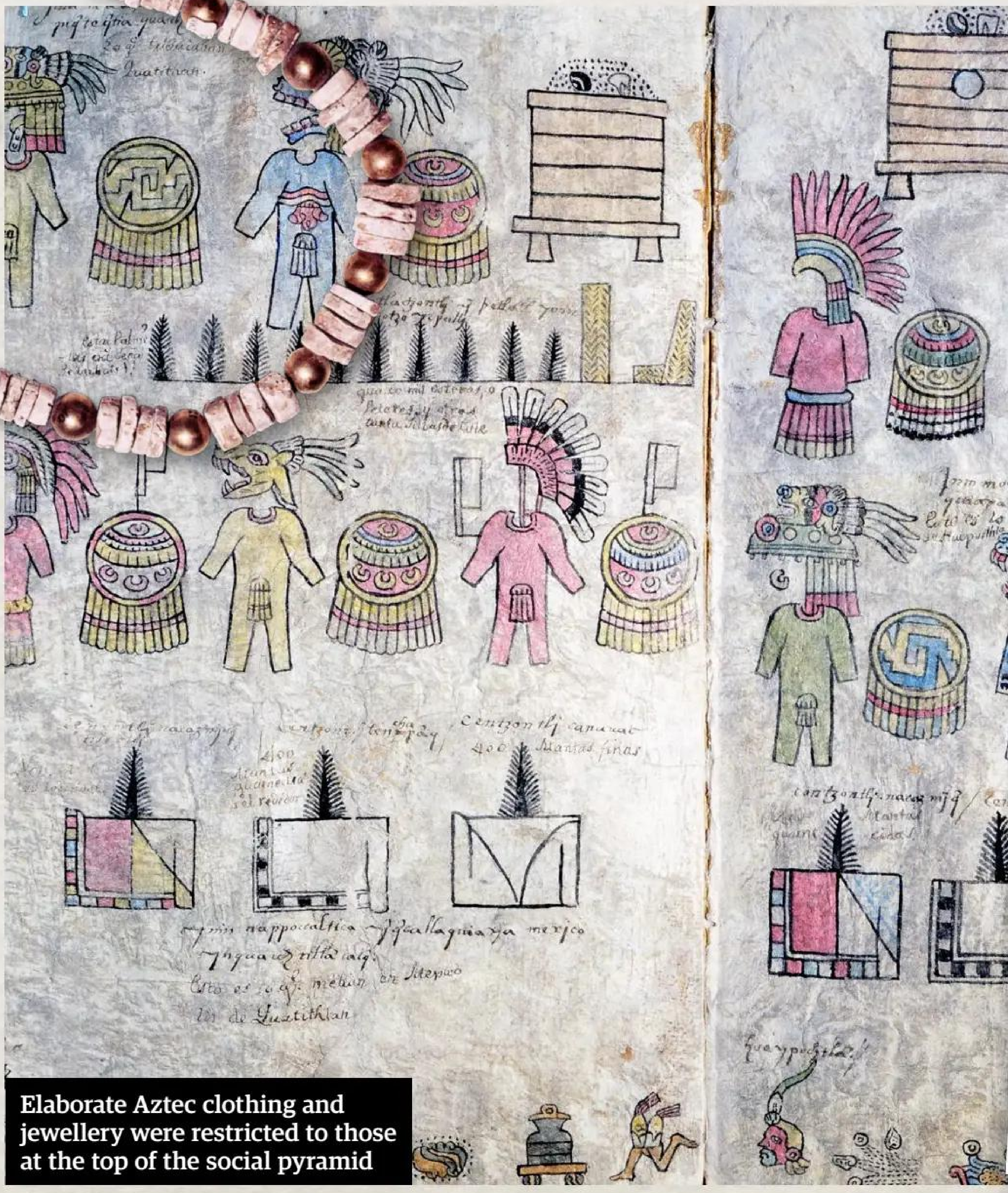
The life of all women, including those of noble stock, was centred on the home and although the high-born were not required to produce cloth to furnish as tax offerings, they still spent much of their time weaving. For the women among the commoners, weaving was a pivotal part of daily life as this provided valuable textiles needed to pay rent and taxes to their lords. Women of all classes also played a significant role in the priesthood with some mothers offering their infant girls to the temple for a life of religious service.

The commoners were by far the largest social class and the vast majority of common men were farmers or fishermen. Away from the agricultural season, they worked for their lords as labourers or performed military service. Indeed, all commoners had a duty to provide their lord with regular tax payments, paid with goods that the family produced, as well as by giving up their time to cultivate his land. Women, meanwhile, surrendered their time to provide domestic duties. These duties were shared among all the lord's subjects; the families working a rota system to ensure a fair balance of time spent. Commoners also served the state, working on large building projects or serving during periods of conflict; the state did not possess a standing army.

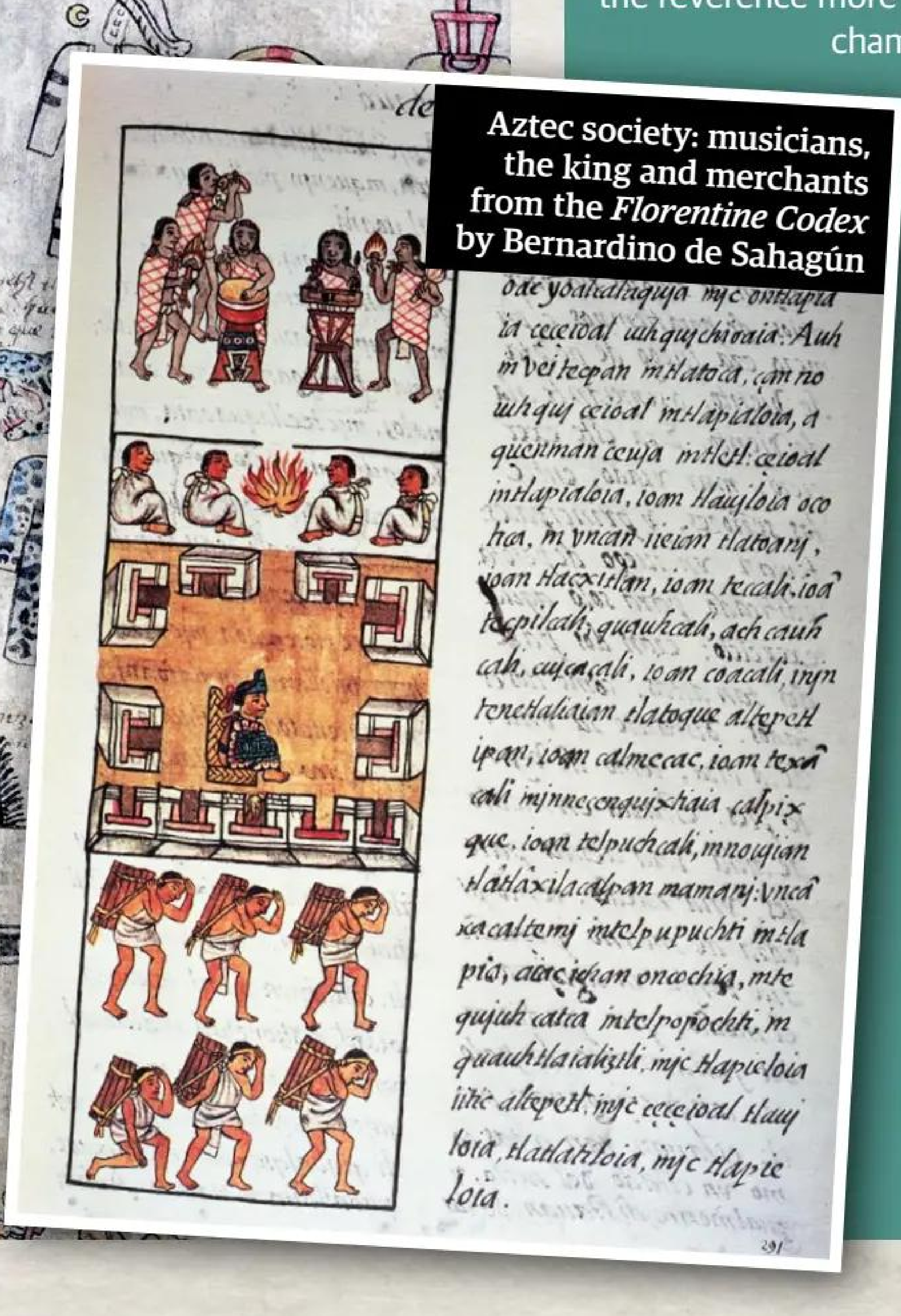
Most commoners were organised in groups, or wards, known as a calpolli. Their lands were farmed by member households, although in reality individual plots of land were passed from one family to another across the generations. Some commoners were not members of calpolli but instead worked their lord's lands exclusively.

Within the commoner class were the artisans and merchants. If they were lucky enough they could, through profitable trading, boost their personal wealth. In the cities, too, the commoners were organised into calpolli, and some worked the surrounding fields as farmers. Many urban dwellers were craftsmen and they benefitted from living near the great markets as well as from their close proximity to the king or high-born nobles who provided the market for luxury goods. Though artisans and merchants gained great wealth they could never rise into the ranks of the nobility. In the middle years of the Aztec Empire, Moctezuma I created a special class, the quauhpilli, to reward those who excelled in combat but this ruling was reversed by Moctezuma II who insisted that only those born into privilege could rank as nobles.

At the very bottom of the social structure were the slaves, or tlacotin. No one was born into slavery, and any child issuing from enslaved parents was born free. Slaves could also marry and own property. Some were enslaved as a form of punishment for heinous crimes, but many people moved into slavery willingly, selling themselves when they could no longer support themselves or when they had amassed great debts. Often, the purchase amount would support the slave and their family for at least a year, after which they would begin their service. Once a freed man or woman had moved into slavery they either worked for a lord or were sold at market. Female slaves were especially valuable as weavers and spinners. Slavery was not immutable and slaves could buy back their freedom once their debts were cleared.



Elaborate Aztec clothing and jewellery were restricted to those at the top of the social pyramid



Aztec society: musicians, the king and merchants from the *Florentine Codex* by Bernardino de Sahagún

A world of trade

Merchants played a key role in the Aztec Empire

The merchants were vital to the expansion and maintenance of the Empire, and provided an invaluable communication system, sharing information that they carried with them on their travels. In the aftermath of war it was usually the merchants who assessed the taxable potential of the conquered town or state in order to formulate the required future levies. There was stratification among the merchants with some working in a small area as itinerant local merchants, the tlanecuilo, who worked a series of markets trading in maize, chilli, turkeys, salt, textiles and cacao.

Standing above them in the social strata were the long-distance traders, the pochteca, who brought home more exotic goods from the far-flung corners of the Empire and the landmass. They often undertook great risks, travelling into or through hostile territory and traversing challenging landscapes fraught with natural dangers. Sometimes their achievements were accorded great value and they were treated with the reverence more normally associated with war champions. These merchants often acted as spies or special agents, sniffing out potential unrest within the Empire, or spotting disharmony in land that their own rulers could then exploit.

These merchants were often their own men and they ensured the steady flow of valuable produce into Aztec lands, such as precious stones or metals or the highly prized quetzal feathers. Such was the merchants' value to the king that he would respond with great vengeance should a prominent merchant be murdered in a far-off land. There is evidence that the most successful pochteca formed a kind of Aztec middle class, though they often had to hide their wealth to conform with Aztec law.

WAR & EMPIRE

What gave the Aztecs the edge over their neighbours, and allowed them to build a remarkable empire?

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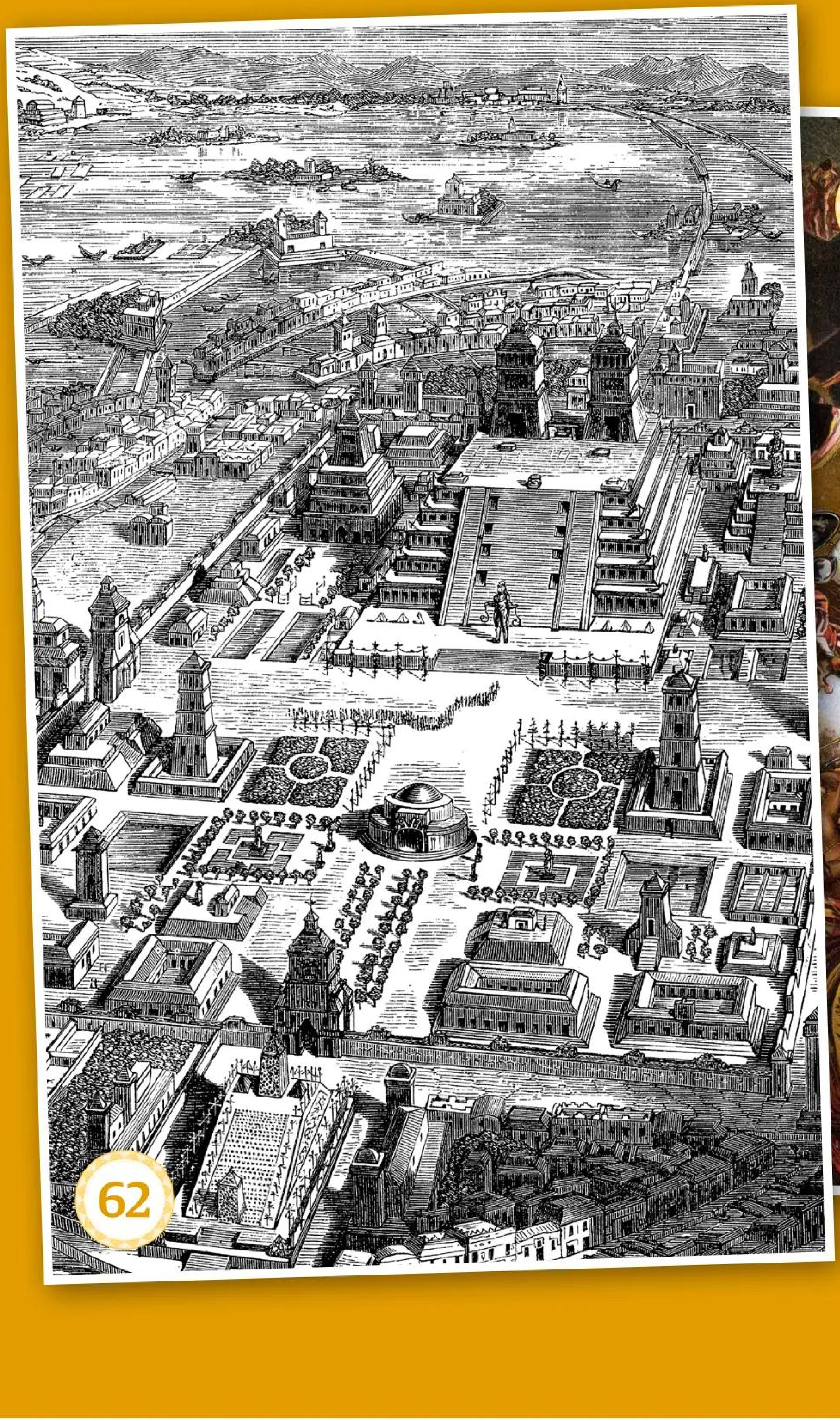

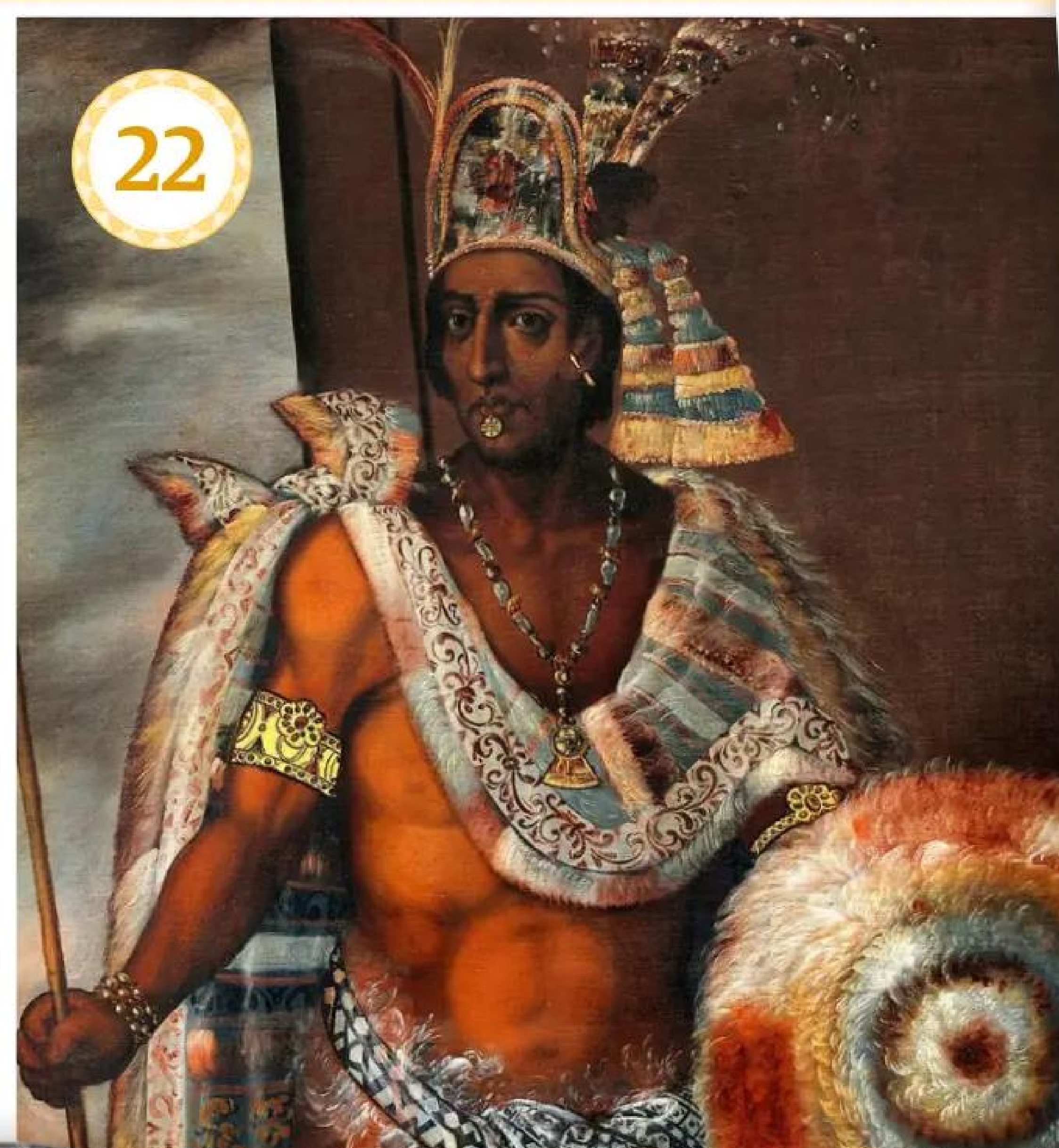
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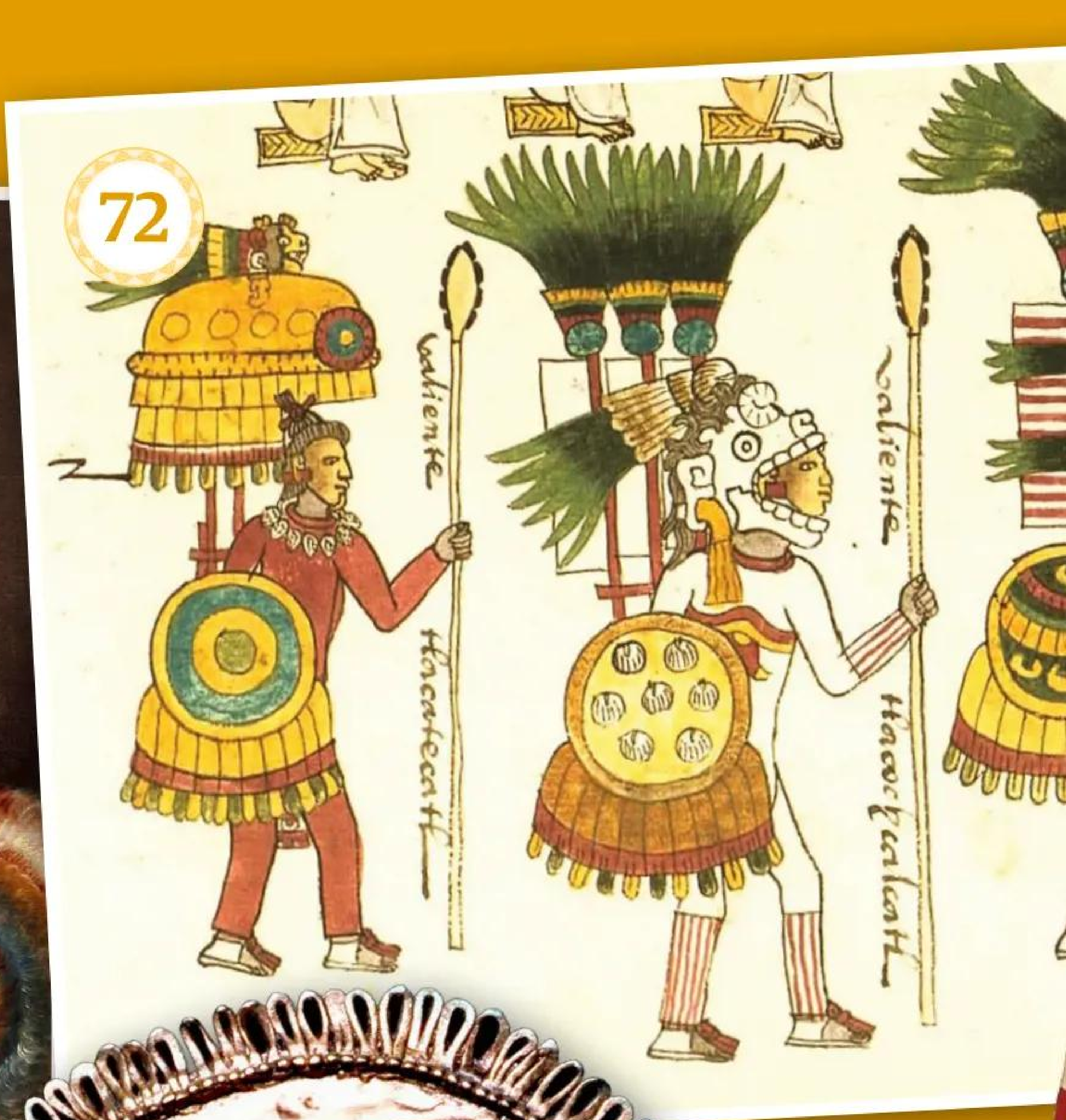
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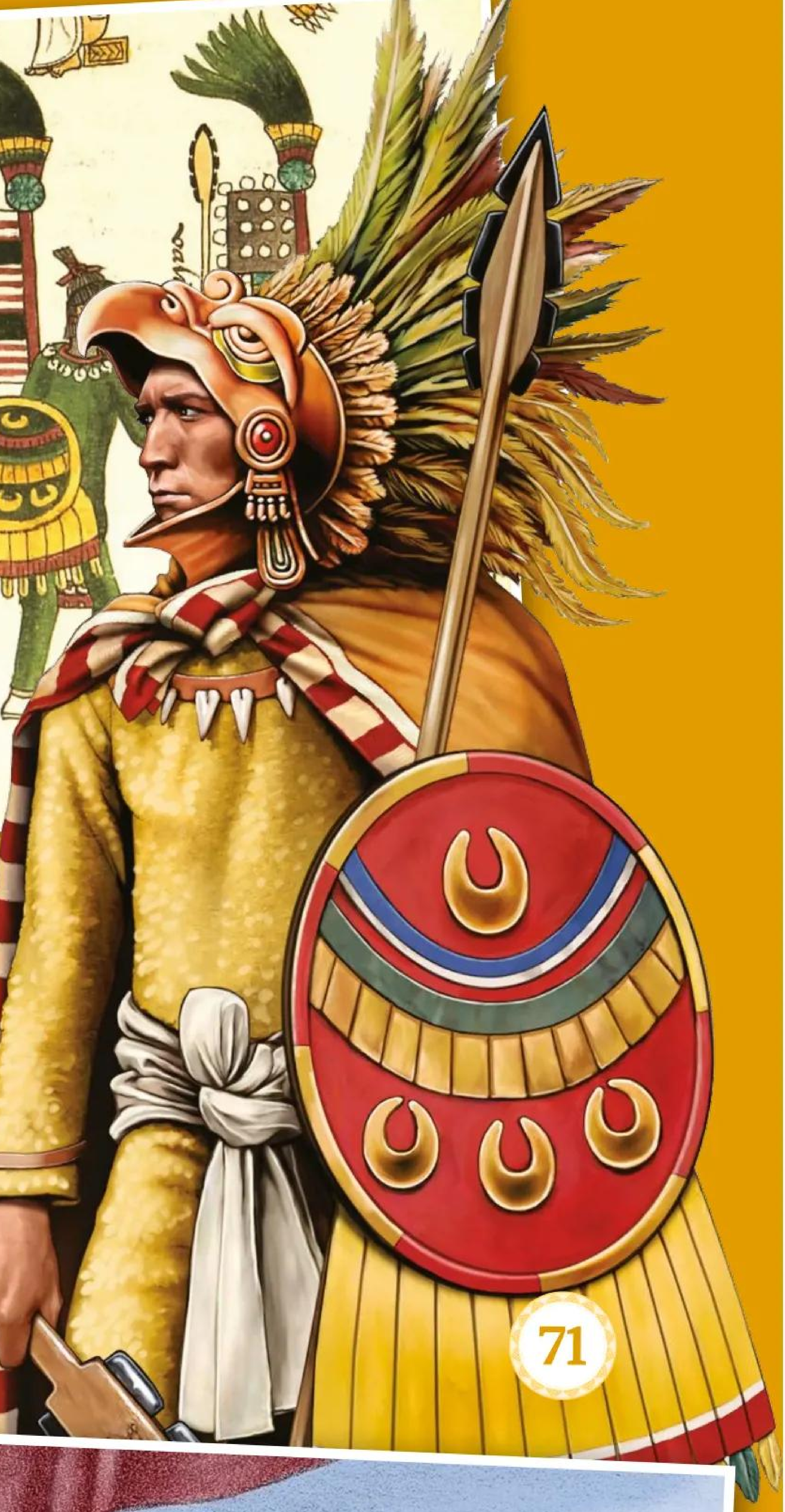
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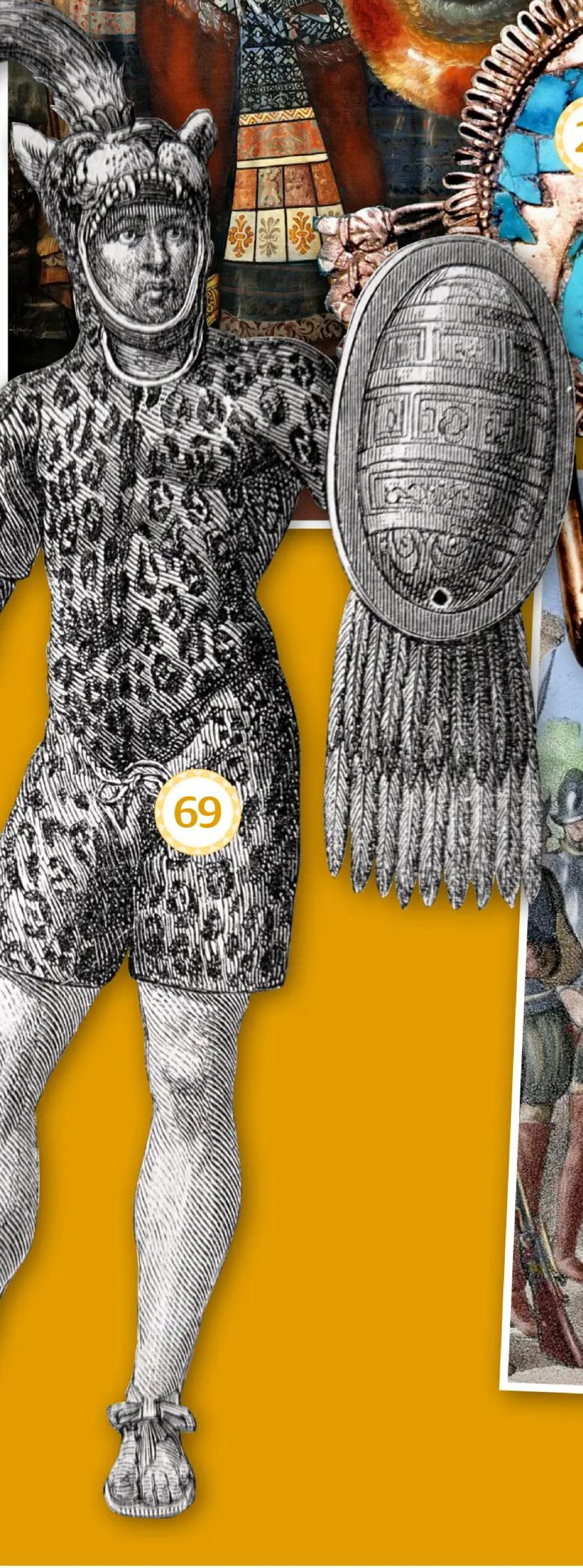
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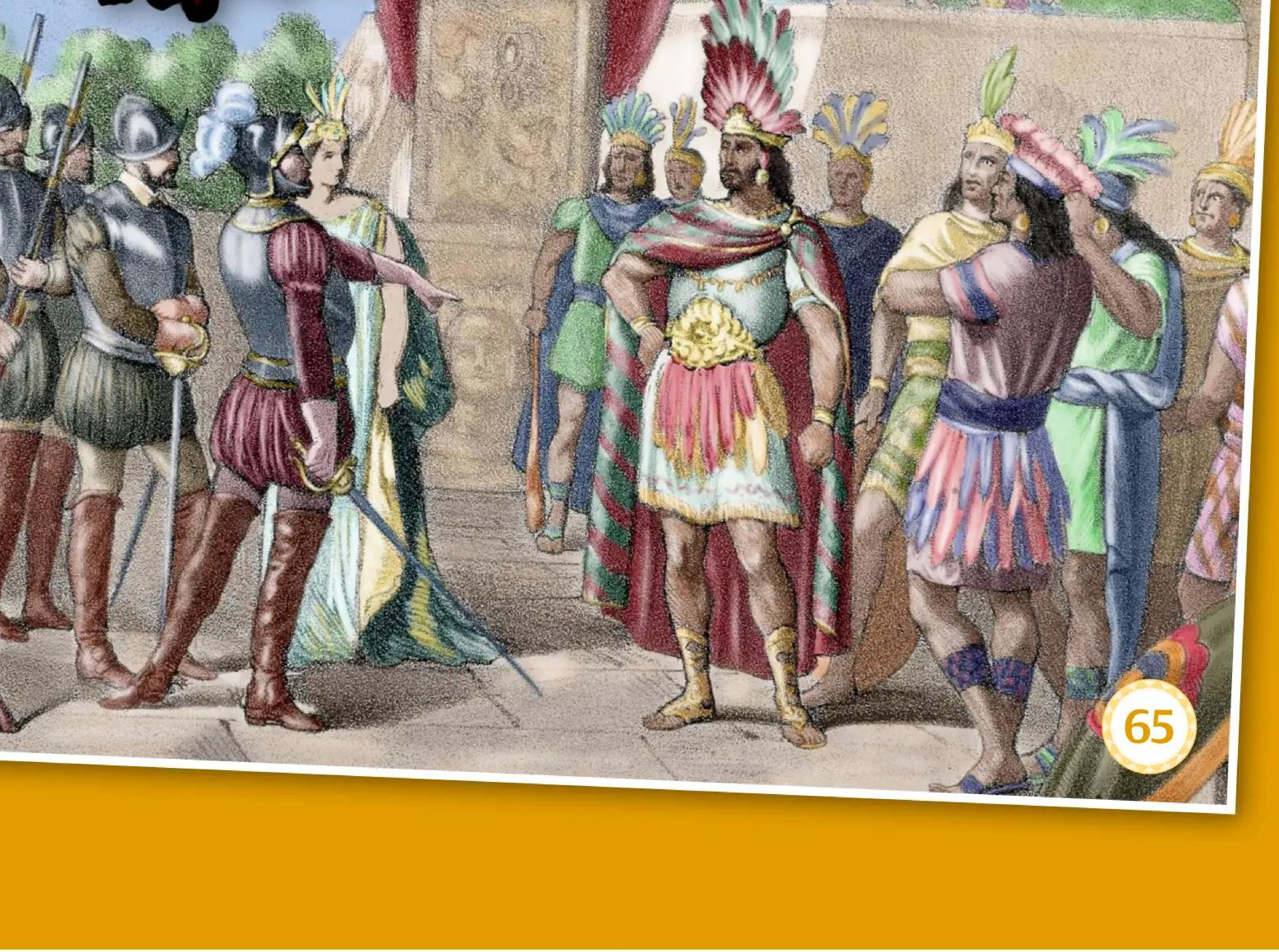
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Moctezuma II: The Aztecs' Last Leader

Just two years after the Aztec ruler welcomed Hernán Cortés into Tenochtitlán, his empire came crashing down

Written by **Dominic Eames**

Moctezuma's welcome to Hernán Cortés would change the Aztec world forever

Each side of the long causeway connecting the shore to Tenochtitlán was lined with beautifully dressed nobles, excited and uncertain in equal measure for the meeting they were about to witness. Between them walked with a deliberate, dignified pace their all-powerful tlatoani, Moctezuma, and his brother behind him. He was heading towards a group of expected visitors who he had never encountered before, foreigners led by a man named Hernán Cortés.

Some of these men from a kingdom across the ocean called Spain rode on strange beasts the Aztecs did not recognise or had chests glinting as if made of metal. They looked ready for war, but Moctezuma received them as honoured guests. Cortés, accompanied by a woman from this land acting as an interpreter, presented his host with a necklace of Venetian glass and received one of gold in return, although he promptly had it melted down. The welcome was a success, so Moctezuma let the Spanish into Tenochtitlán, and in so doing unknowingly doomed his city, his empire, his civilisation and his legacy.

By the time the Spanish arrived in 1519 Moctezuma II had been ruling for around 17 years. He was made ruler, or tlatoani (meaning 'speaker'), with the empire at its peak yet was intelligent, skilled and driven and looked to expand even further than his predecessors. While his father Axayacatl had ruled, Moctezuma received an education in war, religion, science and arts, then during his uncle Ahuitzotl's regime he proved himself politically savvy and a fierce warrior.

So after Moctezuma came to the throne in 1502 following a resplendent coronation, he put this experience to good use. He launched building projects in Tenochtitlán, most notably his lavish palace complex, and played an active role in administration. He also made himself a de facto absolute ruler. His dominion grew too as he went to war, waging successful campaigns of conquest. This in turn meant greater tributes but also more resentment from newly subjugated peoples, some of whom actually rebelled as the empire creaked under its own enormous size.

Somehow Moctezuma managed to keep everyone in control through military might and by sending tens of thousands to be sacrificed. He was always deeply devoted to the gods. While little is known about him as a person – even his name, which means, 'He who frowns like a lord', has become commonly misrepresented as Montezuma - he served as a high priest and may have placed much significance on portents, such as a comet seen in 1509. In fact, much has been made - erroneously - of Moctezuma's supposed fear of omens that foretold of the impending arrival of the Spanish invaders.

After Moctezuma: The last rulers

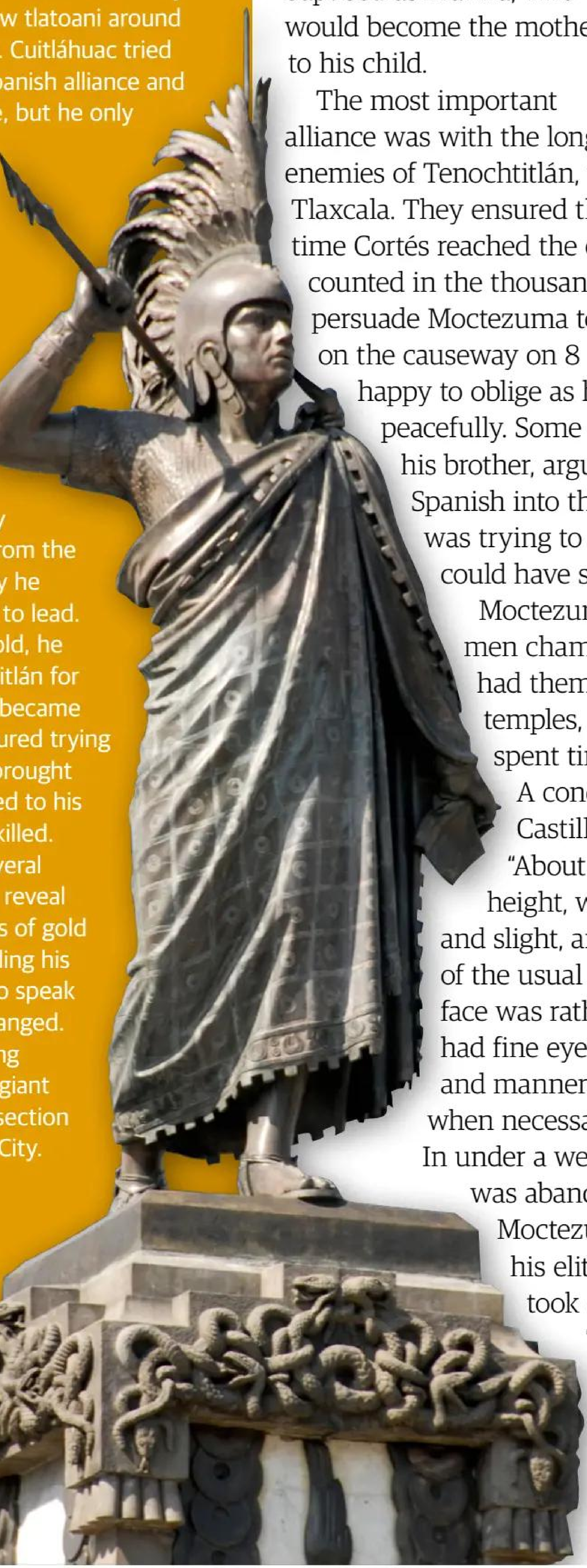
While Moctezuma is maligned, these two are hailed as national heroes

CUITLÁHUAC: 10TH TLATOANI (1520)

When the Spanish arrived, Cuitláhuac warned his brother Moctezuma not to let them into Tenochtitlán, and he was right to be weary – he ended up being imprisoned. Anger and resentment built in the city until he was chosen to be the new tlatoani around the time of the Night of Sadness. Cuitláhuac tried unsuccessfully to form an anti-Spanish alliance and would have achieved much more, but he only ruled for 80 days before becoming one of the many to die from the greatest – if unintended – weapon of the Spanish: smallpox.

CUAUHTÉMOC: 11TH TLATOANI (1520–21)

The final Aztec ruler had similarly been against Spanish presence from the beginning, which was chiefly why he was elected at such a young age to lead. Thought to be around 20 years old, he led the stern defence of Tenochtitlán for much of the siege. When defeat became inevitable Cuauhtémoc was captured trying to sneak away on canoe. When brought before Cortés he allegedly pointed to his dagger as a way of asking to be killed. Instead, he was kept alive for several years as a prisoner. To make him reveal the location of the hidden hordes of gold the Spanish tortured him by holding his feet over hot coals. He refused to speak and Cortés eventually had him hanged. Today, he is celebrated for fighting against a ruthless invader, and a giant statue of him stands at the intersection of two major avenues in Mexico City.



The monument to Cuauhtémoc in Mexico City - there are no such statues of Moctezuma

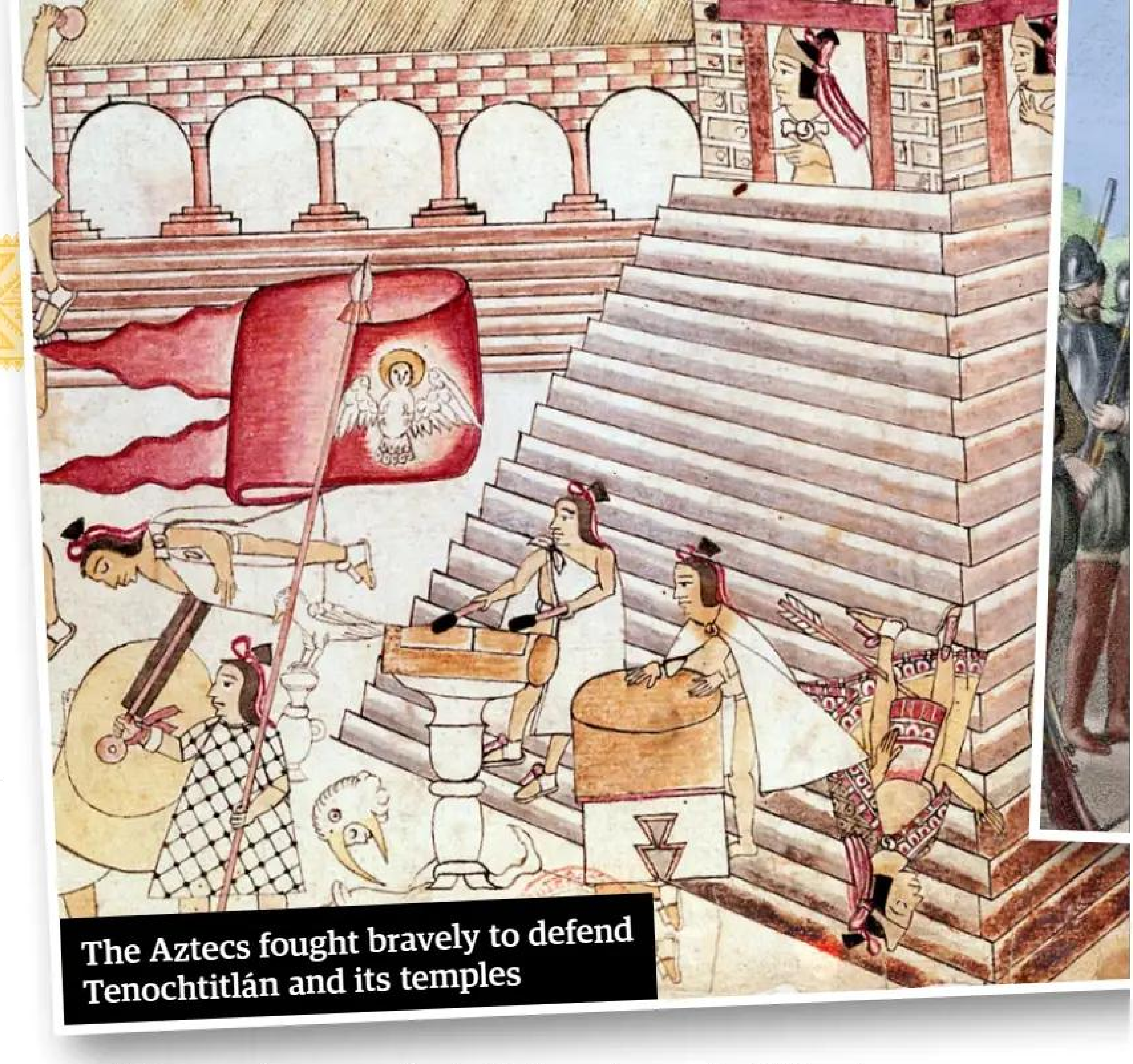
When Moctezuma first heard of pale-faced foreigners in great floating houses, he posted guards to the coast to report on their activity. He was therefore quick to hear of Cortés, an ambitious explorer leading an expedition from Spanish-held Cuba, making landfall some 200 miles from Tenochtitlán in 1519. He dispatched emissaries with gifts of gold, not out of a belief that Cortés was the returned god Quetzalcoatl, but as an attempt to buy off the intruders with tribute. Abiding by the custom in Mesoamerica, the gold had the opposite effect on the Spanish and simply fed their greed.

Cortés - having arrived with around 500 men, 100 sailors and 16 horses, which were new to this land - established the settlement of Veracruz and by August prepared for a march to Tenochtitlán. On the way inland he learned of the hatred felt for the Aztecs by many people under their rule and, after initial fighting, convinced them to support him and his conquistadors. This would not have been possible without his indigenous interpreter La Malinche, baptised as Marina, who would become the mother to his child.

The most important alliance was with the long-time enemies of Tenochtitlán, the Tlaxcala. They ensured that by the time Cortés reached the capital his force counted in the thousands. This certainly helped persuade Moctezuma to greet Cortés so warmly on the causeway on 8 November, and Cortés was happy to oblige as he wanted to see the city peacefully. Some of his officials, including his brother, argued against letting the Spanish into the city, but Moctezuma was trying to avoid a war, one that could have spread across his people.

Moctezuma offered Cortés and his men chambers close to his palace, had them shown around the temples, markets and gardens and spent time with them personally. A conquistador, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, described Moctezuma: "About 40 years old, of good height, well proportioned, spare and slight, and not very dark, though of the usual Indian complexion. His face was rather long and cheerful, he had fine eyes and in his appearance and manner could express geniality or, when necessary, a serious composure."

In under a week, though, diplomacy was abandoned. Cortés seized Moctezuma and kept him and his elite as prisoners while they took control of Tenochtitlán.



The Aztecs fought bravely to defend Tenochtitlán and its temples

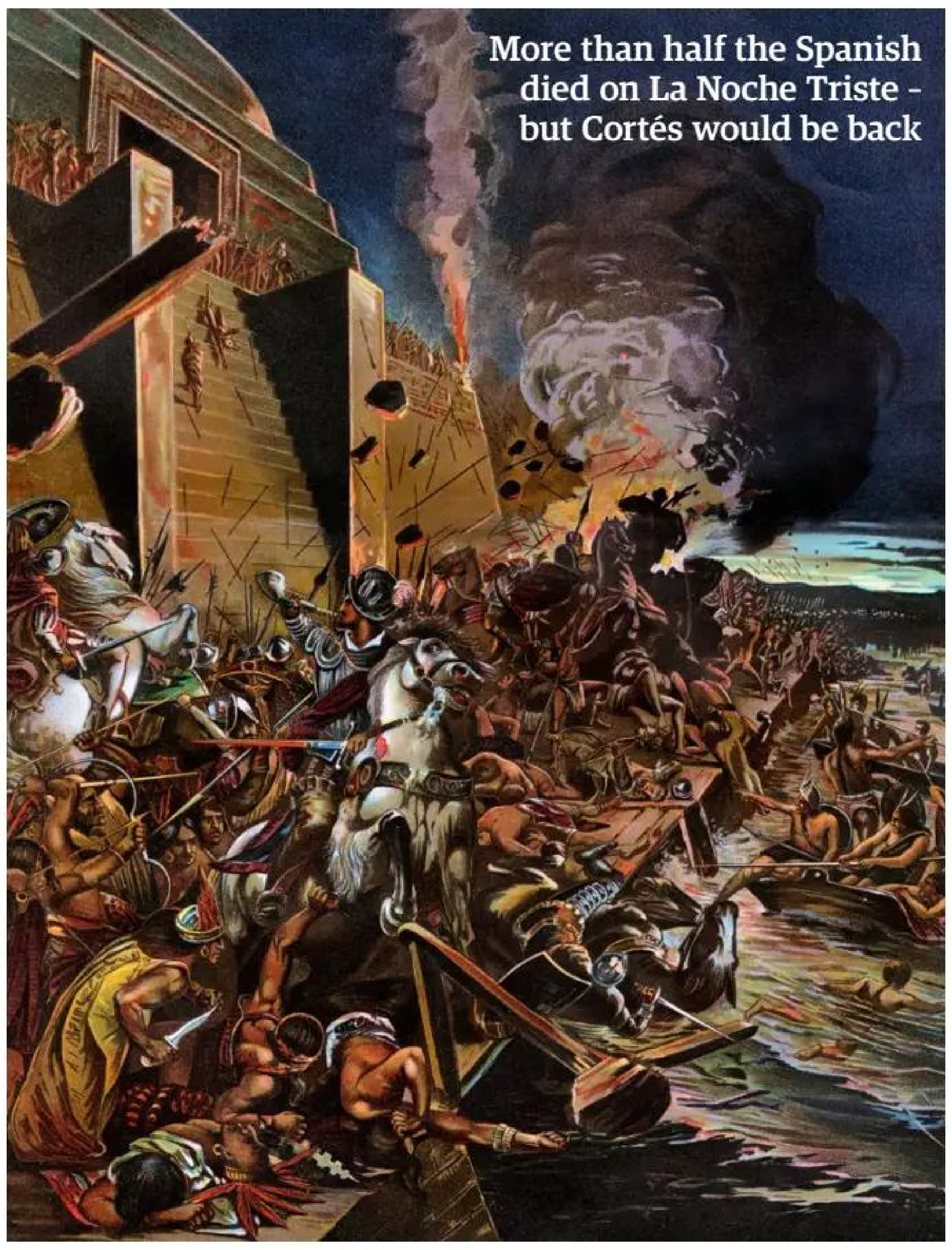
The superior numbers of the Aztecs counted for nothing as long as their tlatoani was held hostage. Moctezuma went along with this, the reasons for which are unknown, and accounts suggest he even remained friendly with the Spanish, teaching them games and taking them hunting and aiding their hoarding of gold.

As well as accumulating wealth, Cortés was motivated by converting the Aztecs from their "evil practices" after being horrified by observing human sacrifices. Statues of the gods were destroyed and a crucifix even placed on the Templo Mayor.

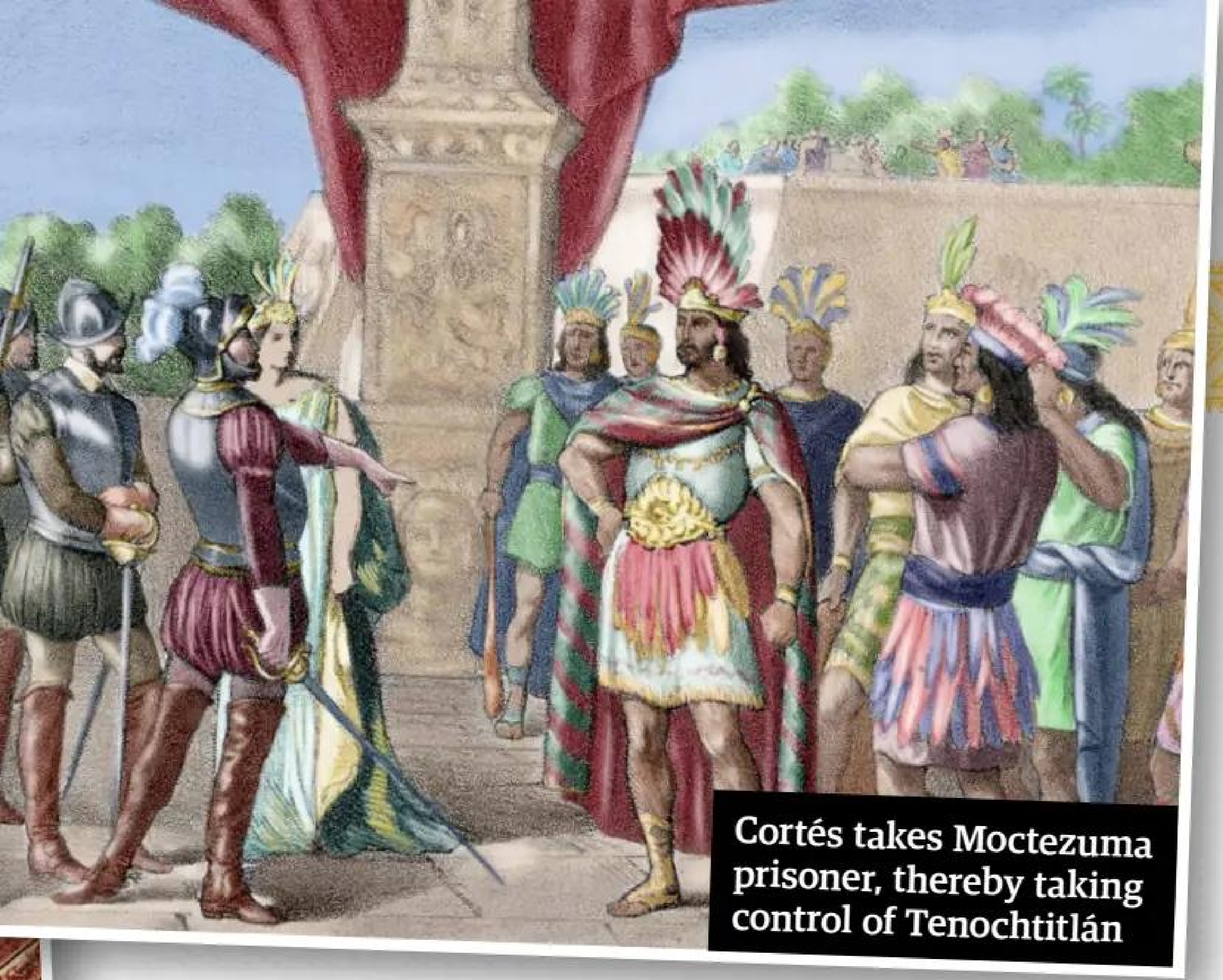
It is estimated that 20 million people died in a five-year period as a result of diseases brought to South America by the Spanish.

The people of Tenochtitlán despised the Spanish presence and grew to resent Moctezuma for his submission.

It took nearly eight months before Cortés' vice-like grip on the city finally loosened. He had to head back to the coast with most of the men in order to deal with a force sent to remove him from command by the governor of Cuba, a rival who had tried to stop the expedition in the first place. An 80-strong garrison remained under Pedro de Alvarado, but he became fearful of an uprising so made a reckless and ruthless pre-emptive strike.



More than half the Spanish died on La Noche Triste - but Cortés would be back



Cortés takes Moctezuma prisoner, thereby taking control of Tenochtitlán

During the festival of Toxcatl the conquistadors slaughtered those worshipping, dancing and singing around the temples. Many members of the nobility were cut down and "the blood of the warriors flowed like water". The Aztecs retaliated. When Cortés returned to Tenochtitlán in June 1520, bringing more men as he had convinced his defeated enemy to join him with promises of gold, he found the Spanish besieged and slowly starving.

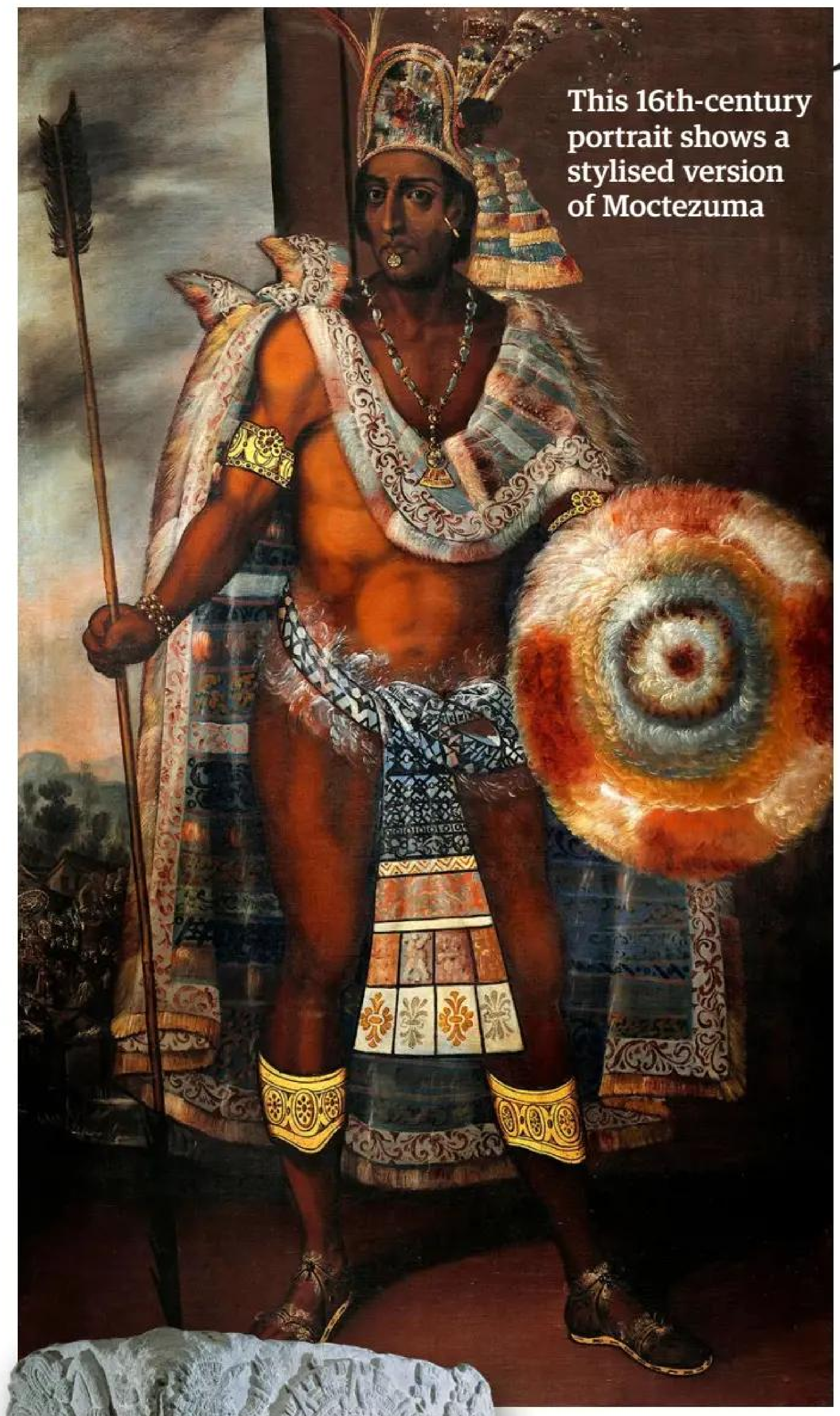
As for Moctezuma, the once great and semi-divine ruler was no longer an active force in his own capital and was unable to determine his own destiny. Even the events of his death are disputed. According to the Spanish, he was taken to a balcony in a last-ditch attempt to calm the situation down only to be pelted with stones. He would die of his injuries. Aztec accounts, however, suggest that Moctezuma was murdered by the Spanish when his usefulness had finally run out. Whatever the truth, (the latter account seems the more probable), Díaz's claim that "Cortés and all of us captains and soldiers wept for him" seems rather disingenuous.

There would be more tears to come following Moctezuma's death. On 30 June the beleaguered Spanish, now facing a ferocious resistance, tried to flee from Tenochtitlán under the cover of darkness but were spotted. Warriors descended and their escape became a bloodbath. Some drowned after falling in the lake and being dragged under by the gold they were desperately carrying. More than half of the Spanish perished in one night - now known as La Noche Triste, or the Night of Sadness - as well as thousands of Tlaxcala and two of Moctezuma's sons, who had been taken captive. Legend has it that Cortés sat under a large cypress tree and wept at his losses.

However, Cortés would not be defeated. Just nine months later he returned to Tenochtitlán, having marshalled his forces and had 12 brigantines built and carried in pieces to Lake Texcoco so he could have supremacy over the waters. The siege, beginning on 28 April 1521, lasted 93 days before the ferocious Aztecs surrendered. Their defeat was not just down to the superior weaponry and tactics of the Spanish but European diseases. They had no immunity and the population was devastated, with Moctezuma's successor and brother Cuitláhuac among the dead. The final tlatoani, Cuauhtémoc, was soon captured. Tenochtitlán was in ruins.

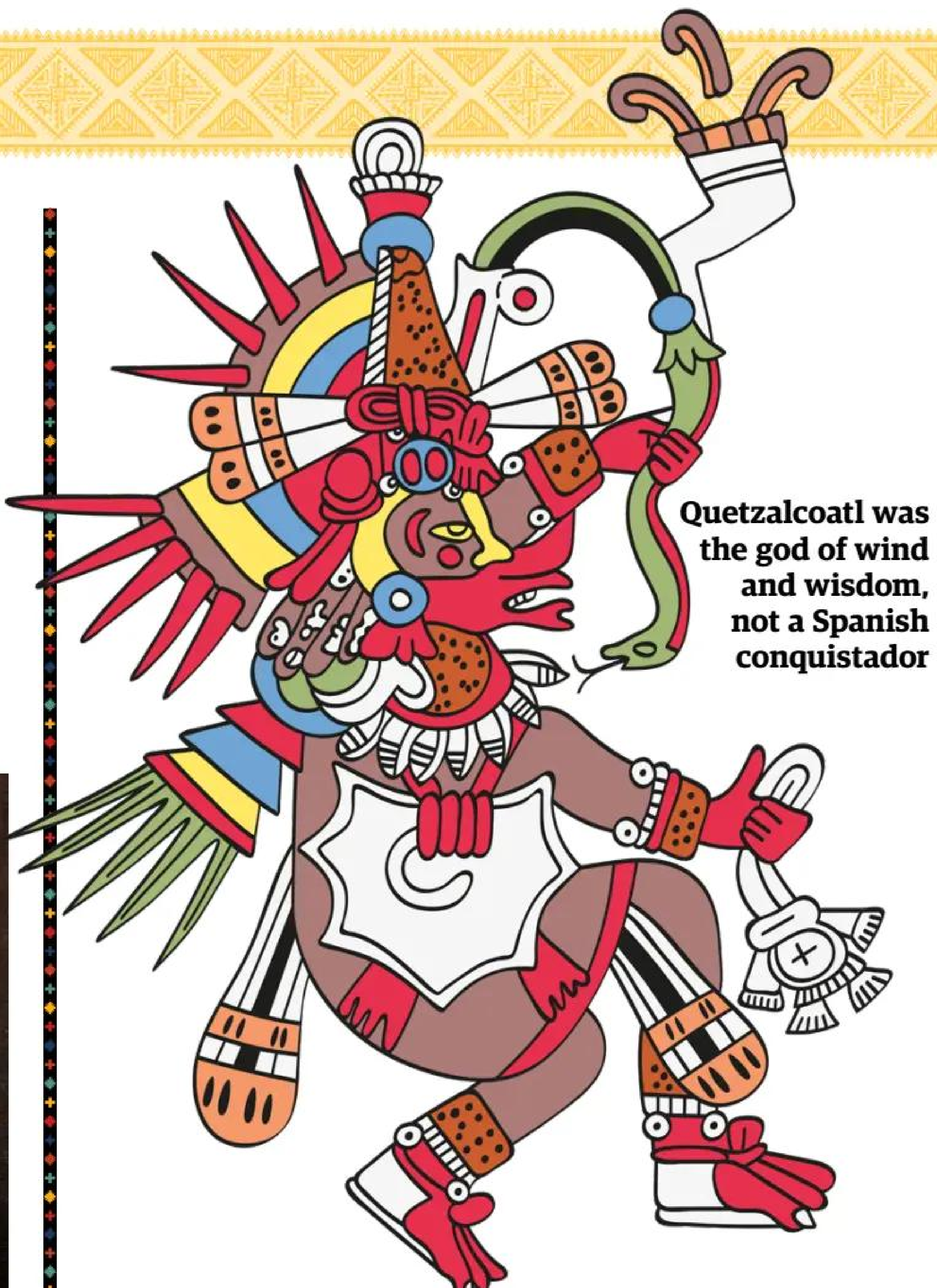
Moctezuma was not alive to see the fall of the Aztec Empire, but his name is held above all others as the one responsible. His reputation is still contentious in Mexico today. At best he is remembered as indecisive and passive, at worst as a Spanish collaborator. His own people turned on him, and the Spanish wasted no time in making him look weak.

It must be noted, though, that they were the winners - the ones who get to write the history. Moctezuma's legacy is far more complicated. When explaining how such a powerful civilisation collapsed in just two years, he makes for a handy scapegoat. Yet he was an able ruler who consolidated the empire, but he was doomed to be the ruler who had to confront the irrepressible march of European expansion into the Americas.



This 16th-century portrait shows a stylised version of Moctezuma

The Teocalli of Sacred Warfare, a volcanic stone throne perhaps used by Moctezuma



Quetzalcoatl was the god of wind and wisdom, not a Spanish conquistador

Did Moctezuma think Cortés was a God?

It may explain why he overdid it with the golden gifts

One of the most common explanations put forward for why Moctezuma acted in such a deferential manner towards Hernán Cortés was that he believed the Spanish explorer to be serpent god Quetzalcoatl.

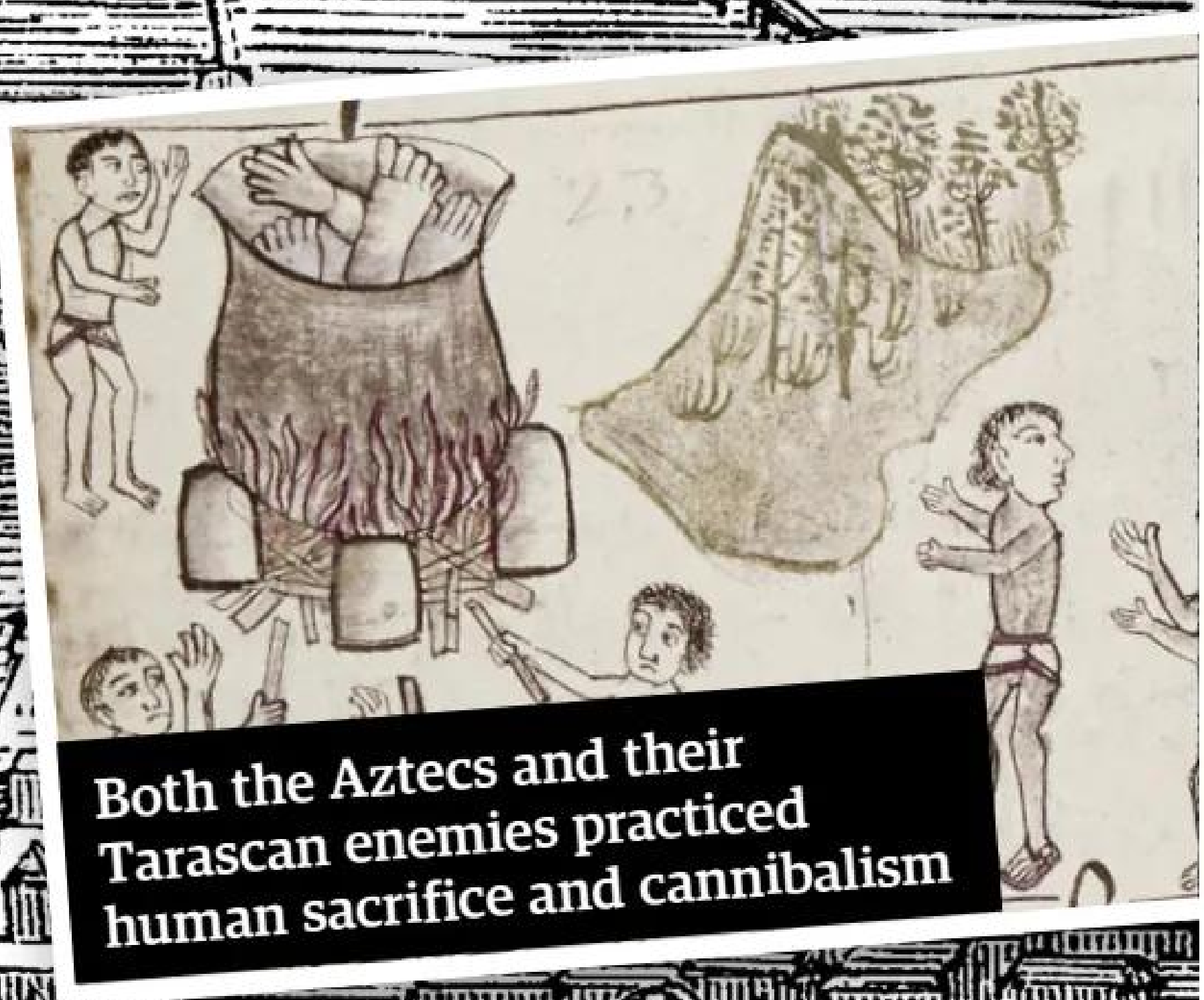
Supposedly, the arrival of the Spanish coincided with the end of a 52-year cycle of the Aztec calendar, which may be signalled by major, destructive events. Quetzalcoatl was prophesied to return from the east too. So far, everything ties up nicely, and that's the problem - the story is far too neat in its display of Moctezuma as being overly superstitious and Cortés as being an all-powerful figure.

The claim is espoused in the *Florentine Codex*, written by the Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and printed five decades after the conquest. It describes a speech given by Moctezuma to Cortés when they first met on the causeway of Tenochtitlán, which almost certainly never happened. The Spanish, including Cortés himself, wished to portray the Aztecs as backward and heretical, while putting themselves in the position of the righteous.

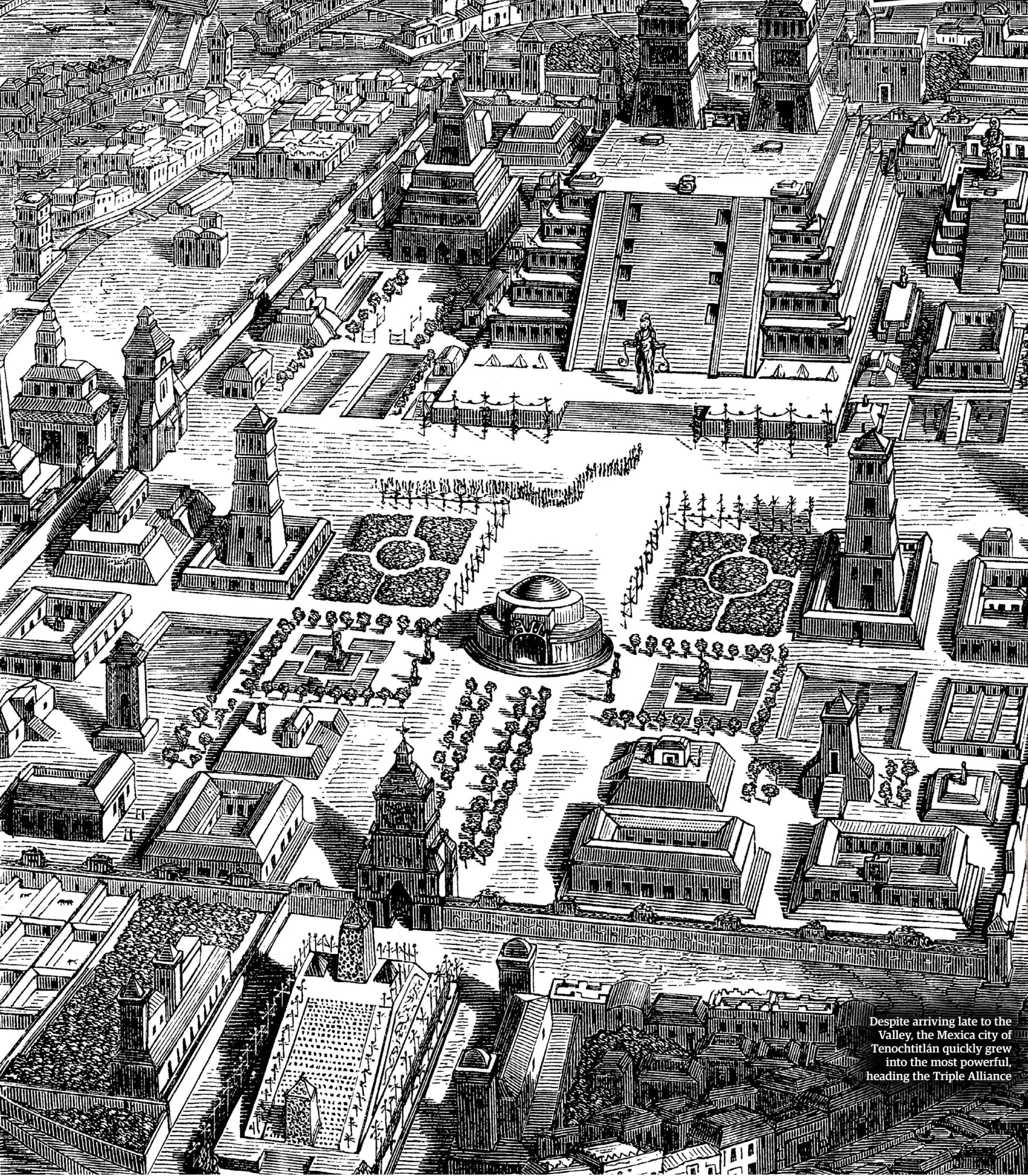
There is no conclusive evidence to say that Moctezuma actually believed Cortés to be the returned god. His gifts of gold and the gracious welcome he offered were not down to a fear of divine wrath but as a show of his own strength and power. The notion may have taken hold as a corruption of his deep devotion to religious observances, while historians now suggest the Aztecs themselves may have encouraged it to try and justify their humiliating defeat.

> "Cortés would not be defeated. He returned to Tenochtitlán having marshalled his forces"

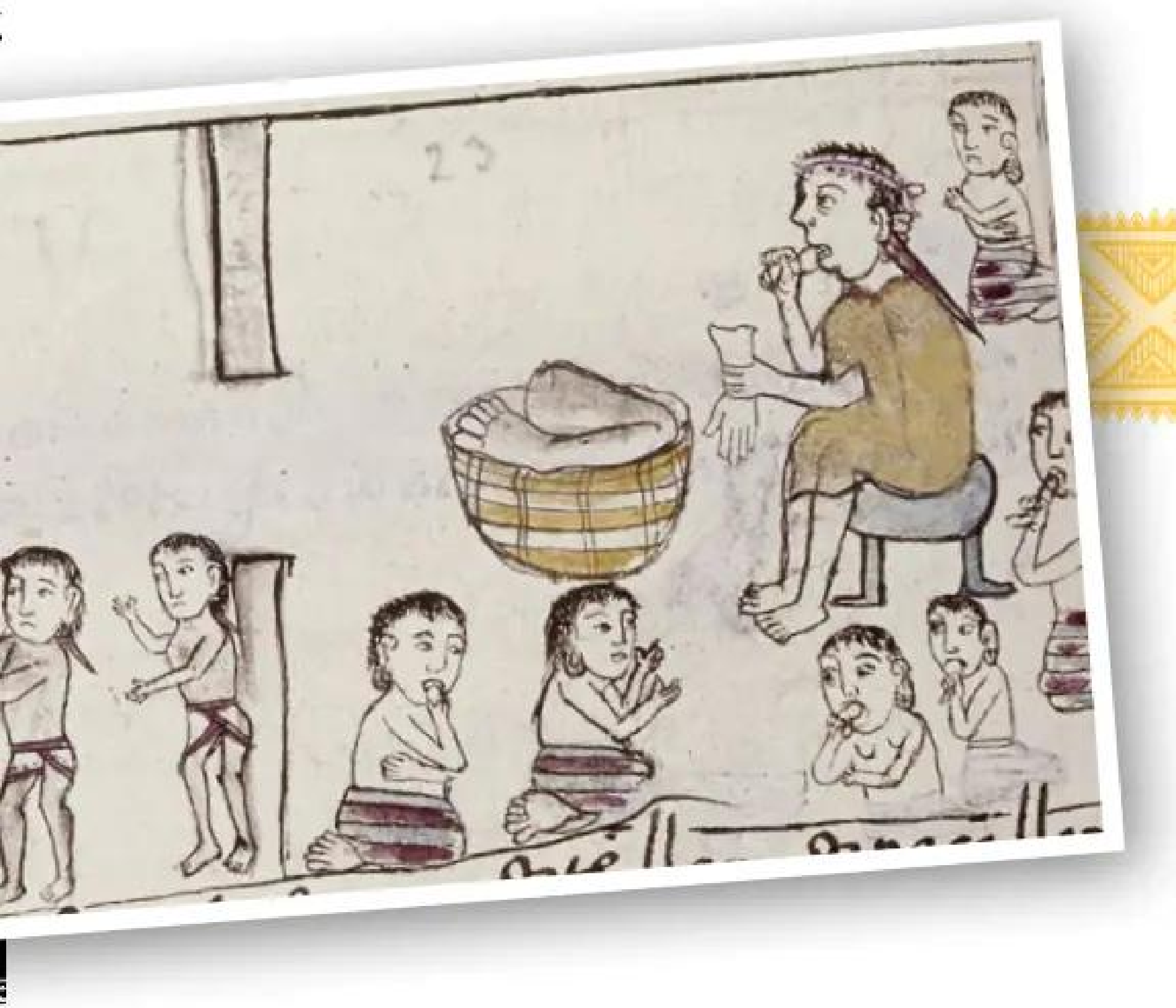
© Alamy, Getty Images



Both the Aztecs and their Tarascan enemies practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism



Despite arriving late to the Valley, the Mexica city of Tenochtitlán quickly grew into the most powerful, heading the Triple Alliance



The Aztec Empire

Though the Aztecs built a mighty empire on the backs of their conquests, it was a house of cards

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

Having been among the last to settle in the Valley of Mexico, the Mexica of Tenochtitlán initially pledged themselves to the powerful Tepanecs on the western shore of Lake Texcoco – helping them conquer new cities, to counter the threat of the Acolhua city-state, Texcoco, on the eastern bank. However, by 1426, Tenochtitlán had grown powerful. Not only was the island-settlement built on fertile land, with an abundance of fish, ducks, frogs and algae, but it was easily defensible, sitting alongside a second market-city, Tlatelolco – where merchants sold exotic goods, such as parrot feathers and jewels.

That year, the Tepanec throne was usurped by the anti-Mexica Maxtla, who simultaneously assassinated the Mexica leader, blockaded Tenochtitlán and attacked Texcoco. In response, Tenochtitlán and Texcoco partnered with Tlacopan, besieging the Tepanec capital of Azcapotzalco for 100 days, chasing out Maxtla. Having been routed to the hills and surrounded, the Tepanec offered the Aztecs not only land and houses, but farms, and regular tribute, to be paid in stone, lime, wood, corn, beans, sage, chili and unlimited vegetables. The three victorious city-states formalised their conquest by forming the Triple Alliance – Mesoamerica's largest ever empire. Going forwards, the three partners would not only share the burden of conquest, but the spoils – with two-fifths of tribute going to Tenochtitlán, two-fifths to Texcoco and one-fifth to Tlacopan.

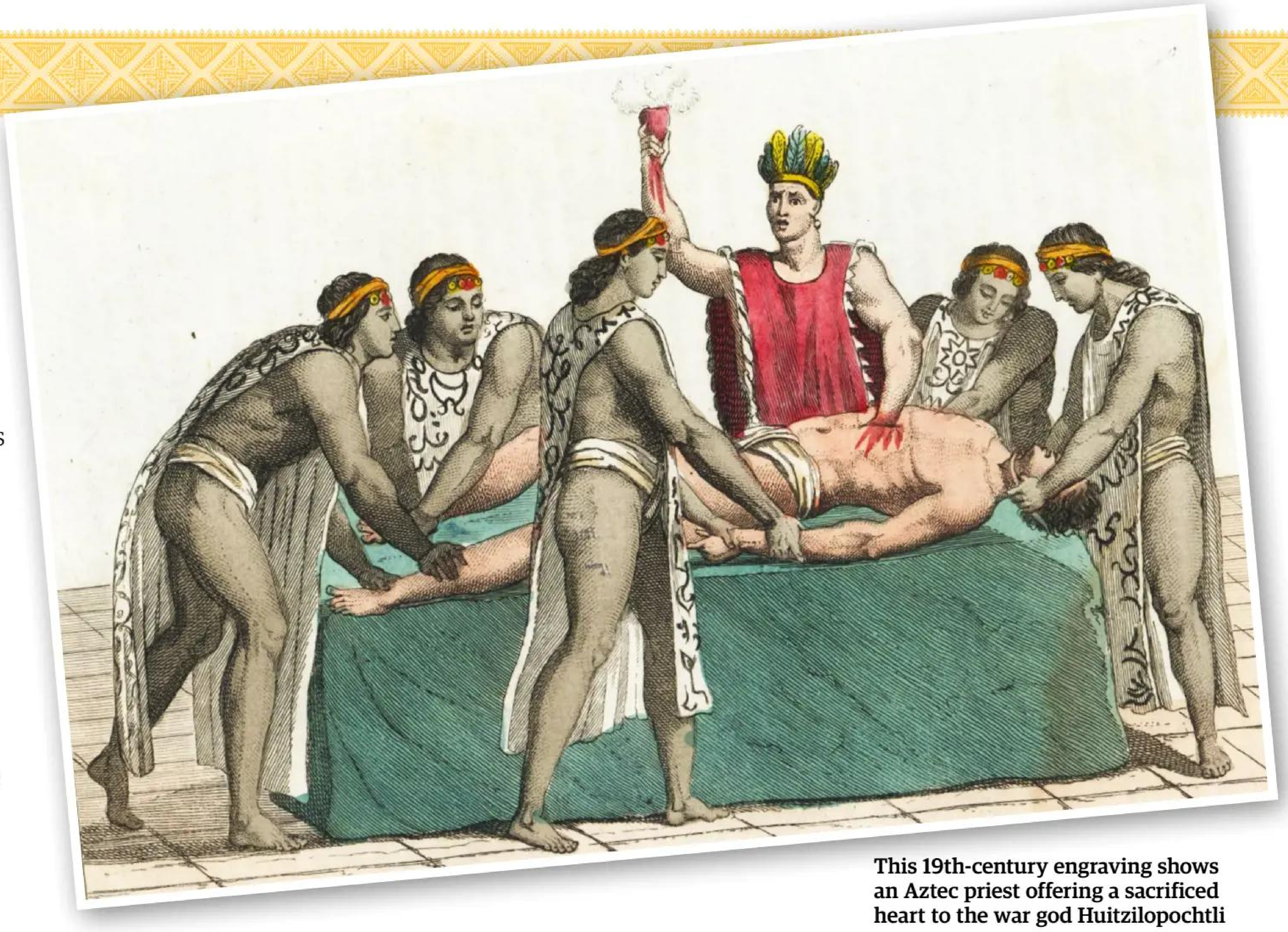
Having secured this generous tribute package from the Tepanecs, the Tenochtitlán tlatoani ('speaker' or king) Itzcóatl, turned his attention to the southern valley, which had stayed neutral during the Tepanec war. The allies got to work, taking the former Tepanec town of Coyoacán, before taking control of Xochimilco and Cuitláhuac in a lucrative district of chinampas (raised fields, or so-called 'floating' gardens on the lakebed) – the Valley's breadbasket. Now, no one could oppose the combined might of the Alliance, and yet there was so much untapped potential; so many cities to subjugate.

Itzcóatl then convinced the Texcoco ruler Nezahualcoyotl to look beyond the Valley, moving past the southern Ajusco mountain range, into modern Morelos. Together, they conquered Cuauhnáhuac and Huaxtepec, highly populated, agricultural city-states. And so they continued. Defeated leaders would either pledge their allegiance to the Aztecs, or be replaced. In this way, the Aztecs steadily built an empire of tributaries. Though they exercised little direct control over their conquered territories, the empire required cities to provide soldiers and logistical support to the Aztec army – ensuring it would always remain omnipotent.

At its peak, the Aztec empire covered more than 200,000 square kilometres and had a population of 5-6 million

Having expanded the Aztec realm, Itzcóatl was keen to inflate the influence of the Mexica within it. He ordered old history codices be burned and rewritten to emphasise the crucial role of his people. After his death, Itzcóatl was succeeded by his nephew, Moctezuma I, who ruled for 28 years. Newly crowned, he sought to project his might through the tried and tested art of building. He began construction on the fourth and most magnificent iteration of the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlán. Dedicated to the war god Huitzilopochtli and the storm god Tlaloc, the temple would be a marvel of architecture, as well as a reminder to all of who reigned supreme at the centre of the universe. Moctezuma demanded that all the city-states across the Valley provided building materials and labour for its construction. However, the stone-rich city-state of Chalco, allied to both the Mixtecs and Eastern Nahua, refused. Conquering Chalco, which had never before been

The base of a stone box, dedicated to the rain god Tlaloc, which once held the ashes of Ahuitzotl

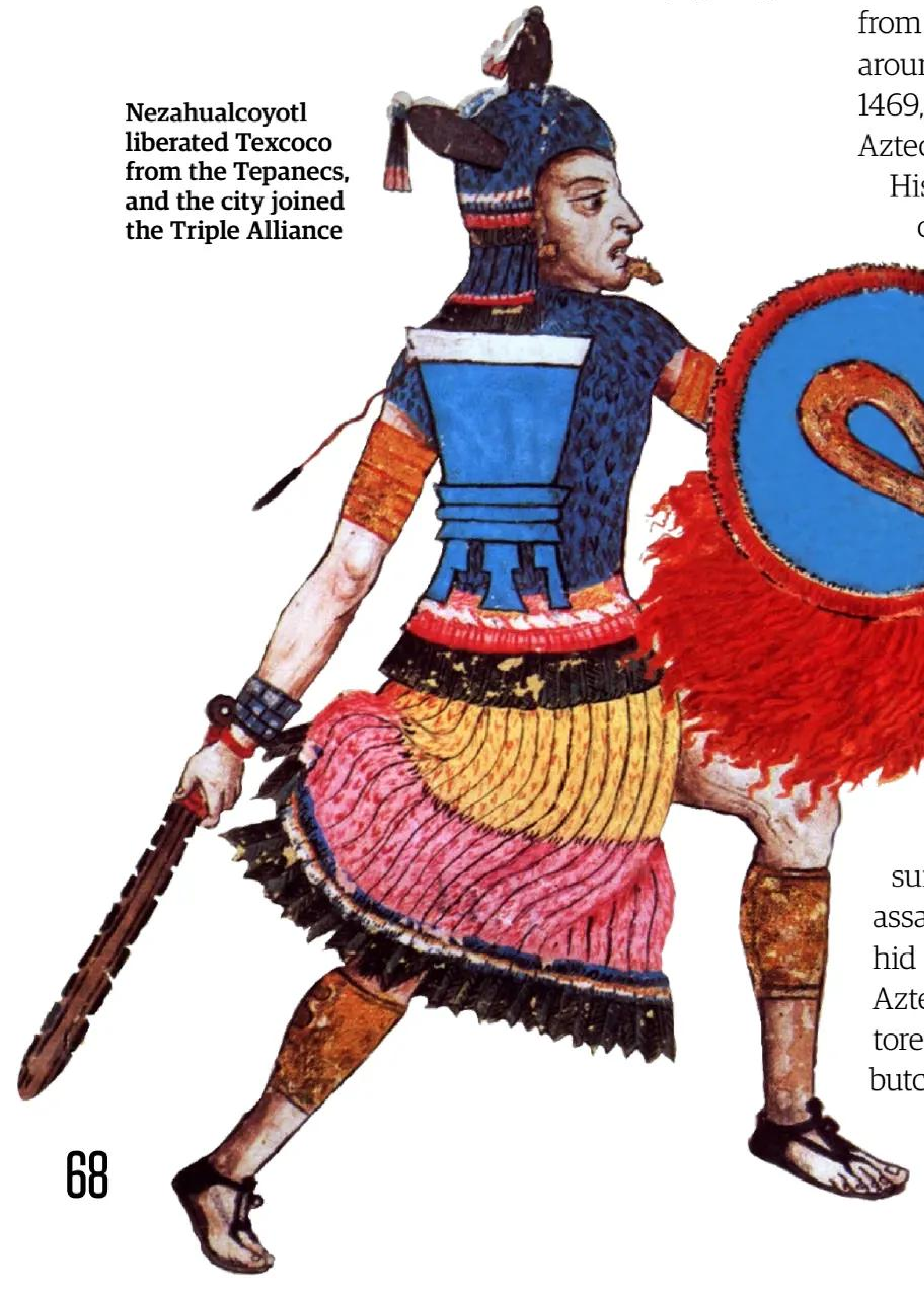


This 19th-century engraving shows an Aztec priest offering a sacrificed heart to the war god Huitzilopochtli

subjugated, with the help of Nezahualcoyotl, proved one of Moctezuma's first great victories.

Over the next ten years, under the advice of his high priest, Moctezuma micromanaged the allies beneath his yoke, replacing their kings with puppet rulers, creating new administrative posts and expanding the tribute system across the empire. Tribute was collected four times a year by Mexica officials, neutering the traditional dynasties and helping to further empower the Mexica. He also pioneered a legal code, carefully controlling social conduct and distinguishing the pipiltin, those in power, from the macehualtin, those who received orders. Commoners were forbidden from wearing cotton, on pain of death, and only nobles and 'valiant warriors' were allowed to build two-storey houses. However, the law also emphasised education, requiring all barrios to host schools or monasteries, teaching young men religion, warfare and manners. Crucially, he also introduced the post of quauhpilli, or eagle lord, which would give talented commoners a rare opportunity to prove themselves, and rise through the ranks on their martial merits.

Progress was stunted somewhat from 1450 to 1454 by a drought, which devastated the Valley and forced the empire to open up its royal granaries. By the time rainfall returned to normal, thousands had died. However, in 1458, Moctezuma and Nezahualcoyotl teamed up once again, embarking on a campaign to further expand their domain. Avoiding direct conflict with the powerful Eastern Nahuas of Tlaxcala, they firstly reconquered former holdings, which had since rebelled or withheld tribute, such as Cuauhnáhuac, before pressing further south, beyond the mountains, towards the Gulf Coast and into modern Oaxaca. Subjugating northern Veracruz, the Aztecs secured regular payments of textiles, cacao, gold, cotton, food, priceless feathers of tropical birds, exotic shells and warrior costumes.

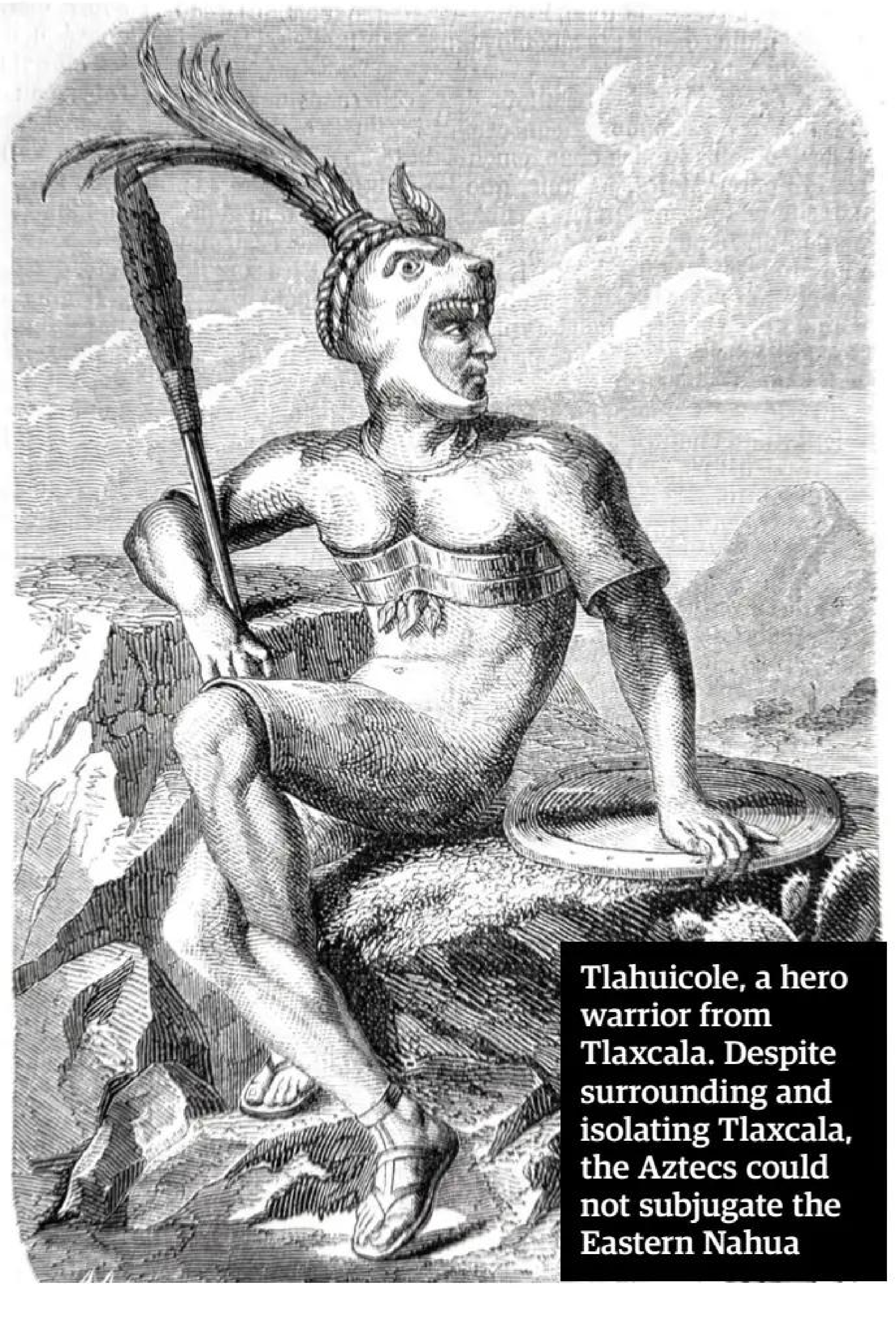


Nezahualcoyotl liberated Texcoco from the Tepanecs, and the city joined the Triple Alliance

In 1458, an army of 300,000 Aztecs marched 800 kilometres south to the Mixtec kingdom of Coixtlahuaca, in Oaxaca. Though the Mixtec lord Atonal pleaded for help, it was too late; he was strangled, his city captured and his men sacrificed at the Templo Mayor. It was a brutal warning to the other city-states of Oaxaca and Puebla. Curiously, while the Mexica claimed to have conquered these territories with some minor help from Texcoco, from Texcoco's standpoint it was the opposite way around. Regardless, by the time of his death circa 1469, Moctezuma had substantially expanded the Aztec empire.

His successor, Axayacatl, prioritised the consolidation of his newfound holdings, introducing the policies of his empire, such as the tribute system, to these additional territories. During his reign, Tenochtitlán's wealthy twin city Tlatelolco, which had retained an independent leader, grew weary of handing over tribute, and revolted. Though Axayacatl tried some classic Aztec diplomacy by marrying his sister to Moquihuix (the ruler of Tlatelolco) the latter was not content, and infamously mistreated her. Furious, Axayacatl sent an army to remind his neighbours of their place; blockading all the surrounding roads, before launching a bloody assault and seizing the marketplace. Moquihuix hid in the sanctuary of the local temple, but the Aztecs broke in, bludgeoned him to death and tore down the temple, before looting the city and butchering its residents.

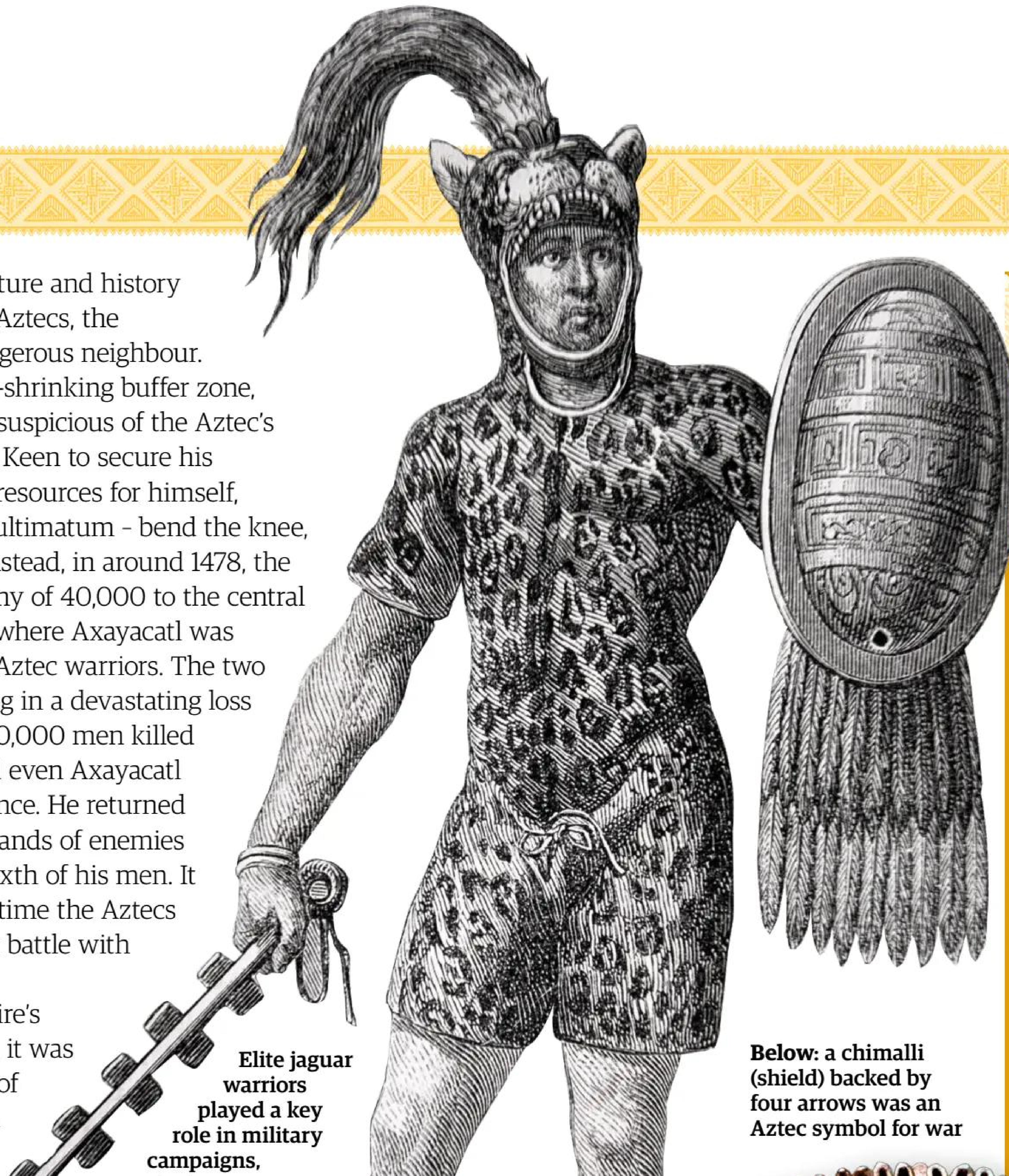
Having sent a very clear message, Axayacatl then installed a military governor in the place of Tlatelolco's deposed king. Its eclectic market was now the largest in Mesoamerica, and controlling its merchants was a serious coup. Axayacatl also conquered the Toluca Valley to the west – an ethnically diverse region, which served as a buffer between the Valley of Mexico and the Tarascan empire in western Mexico. Back in the capital, he commissioned the Sun Stone, a great stone disc, celebrating the sun, war and the empire's conquests – with labour and material levied from Texcoco, Tlacopan and other Aztec city-states. Drunk on the nectar of success, Axayacatl decided to go all in. It was time to take on the mighty Tarascans.



Tlahuicole, a hero warrior from Tlaxcala. Despite surrounding and isolating Tlaxcala, the Aztecs could not subjugate the Eastern Nahua

With a power structure and history mirroring that of the Aztecs, the Tarascans were a dangerous neighbour. Conscious of the ever-shrinking buffer zone, they had long grown suspicious of the Aztec's expansionist designs. Keen to secure his neighbours' plentiful resources for himself, Axayacatl offered an ultimatum – bend the knee, or face destruction. Instead, in around 1478, the Tarascans sent an army of 40,000 to the central Mexican highlands – where Axayacatl was waiting with 24,000 Aztec warriors. The two sides clashed, resulting in a devastating loss for the Aztecs, with 20,000 men killed or taken prisoner, and even Axayacatl wounded in the violence. He returned home, not with thousands of enemies to sacrifice, but one-sixth of his men. It was the first and last time the Aztecs would ever risk direct battle with the Tarascans.

Thanks to the empire's dynamic trade routes, it was not long before word of the Aztec humiliation got out and rebellion clung to the air. After the death of the long-standing Texcoco king, Nezahualcoyotl, Axayacatl was able to muscle in on the power vacuum, increasing his share of the Alliance's tribute takings. Though the empire was still technically ruled by the Triple Alliance, it was clear that the Mexica held most of the cards. However, across the realm, rumblings of discontent had grown into an earthquake, as even distant tributaries rose up against their great speaker, who it seemed had fallen out of favour with the gods.

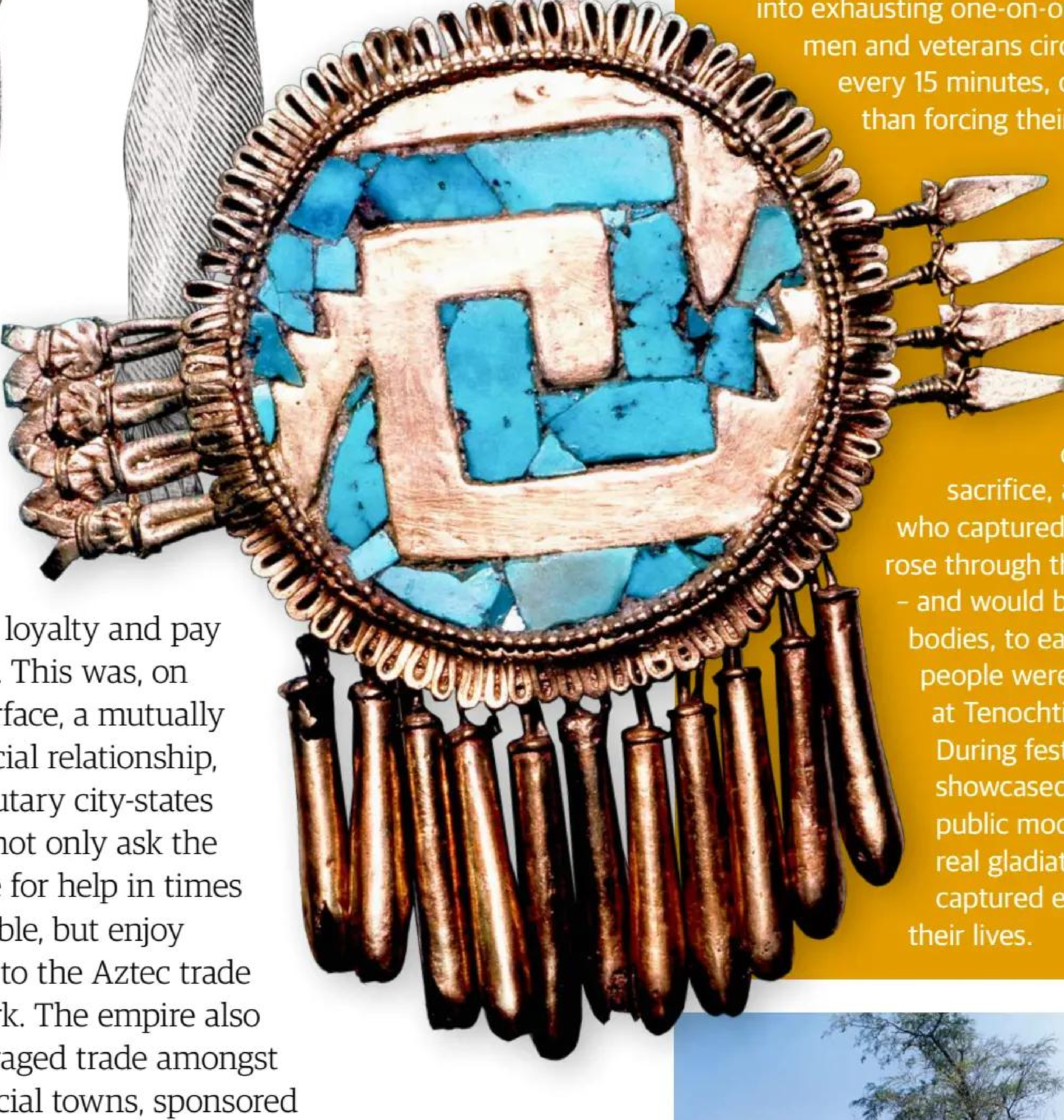


Elite jaguar warriors played a key role in military campaigns, capturing enemy soldiers for sacrifice

Axayacatl was succeeded three years later by his brother Tizoc, a poor leader who did not contribute much to the empire. After his death, or perhaps murder, in 1486, his sibling Ahuitzotl ascended to the since-inflated position of huehuetlatoani, or 'supreme speaker'. His coronation ceremony was one of gratuitous pomp, reinforced by the completion of the magnificent Templo Mayor the following year. It was commemorated with a four-day ceremony, which many claimed was the greatest act of bloodletting in Aztec history, with thousands sacrificed.

The Aztec distribution of power was a problematic one. Even when they conquered a territory, the empire let local dynasties preside over their own realms, simply requiring they pledge loyalty and pay tribute. This was, on the surface, a mutually beneficial relationship, as tributary city-states could not only ask the empire for help in times of trouble, but enjoy access to the Aztec trade network. The empire also encouraged trade amongst provincial towns, sponsored professional merchants and protected market towns and trade routes. This helped to accelerate cultural development as far-flung, fertile regions became interconnected.

Below: a chimalli (shield) backed by four arrows was an Aztec symbol for war



"The empire was technically ruled by the Alliance, but the Mexica held the cards"

Aztec armies

Aztec conflict was a bloody game of chess, a duty and an art, steeped in ritual

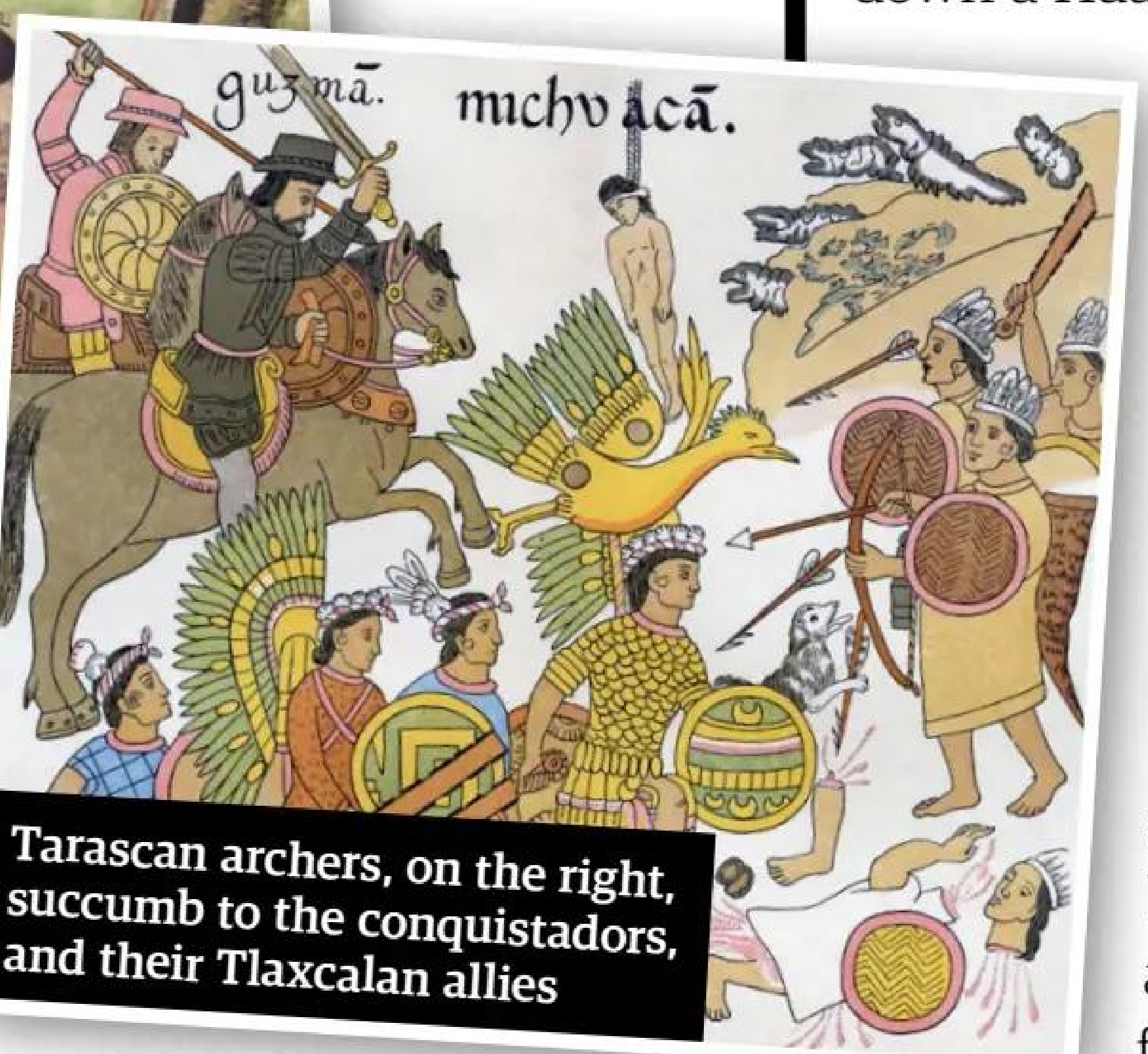
Rather than kill their opponents, the Aztecs preferred to capture them alive. Hence, strategy played a crucial role in conflict; using superior numbers to outflank and surround the enemy. To do so, they erected a command post on a hill, overlooking the enemy, with runners positioned every four kilometres, to carry messages by relay. For rapid long-distance communication, they used smoke signals, or heliograph mirror signals.

Battle opened with an exchange of insults, mocking comedy sketches and obscene gestures. Slingers and bowmen would launch an opening salvo at the start of battle, picking off lightly armoured novices, before retreating. Following this, one or both of the armies would charge at the other, as the vanguards attempted to smash through one another's lines – accompanied by standard bearers, conch blasts and pummelling drums communicating the general's movements. After that, they broke off into exhausting one-on-one combat, with fresh men and veterans circulated into the centre every 15 minutes, or as necessary. Rather than forcing their enemies to fight to the death, the Aztecs allowed them to retreat, only to hunt and chase them down once their lines had been broken.

Battle was a lucrative source of victims for human sacrifice, and as such, the soldiers who captured the most enemies rose through the ranks the fastest – and would be given their victims' bodies, to eat later. Up to 15,000 people were sacrificed every year, at Tenochtitlán's Templo Mayor. During festivals, young teenagers showcased their skills with public mock battles – alongside real gladiatorial bouts between captured enemies, fighting for their lives.

Capturing the southern towns of Xochimilco and Cuitlahuac gave the Triple Alliance a fertile district of chinampas (lakebed gardens)

Left: An aerial view of yácatas (temple pyramids) in the Tarascan ruins of Tzintzuntzan

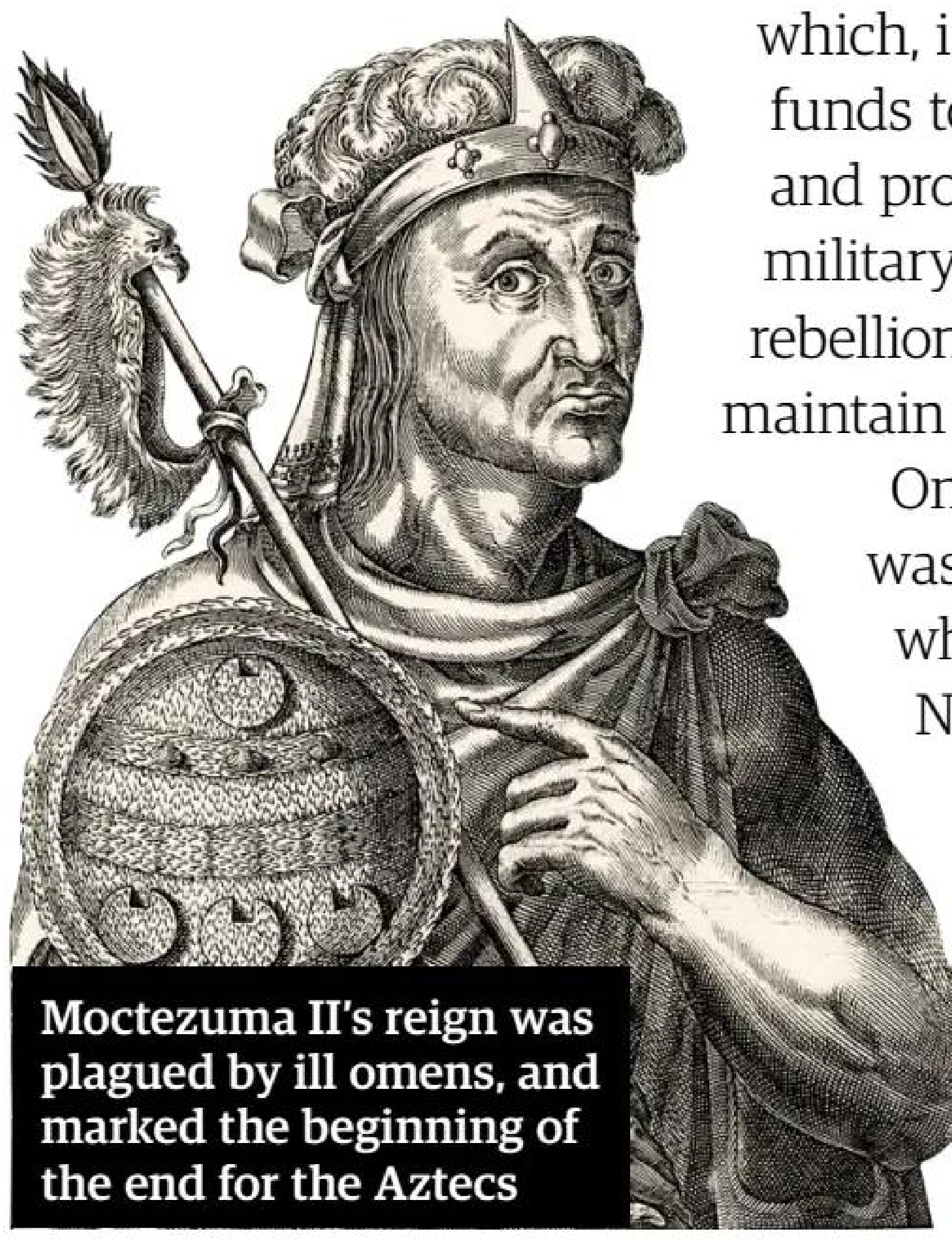


Tarascan archers, on the right, succumb to the conquistadors, and their Tlaxcalan allies

However, while rapid expansion denied territory to emergent, neighbouring powers, it also made for an unstable realm; prone to rebellion and strife, whenever local leaders decided to stop paying tribute. After reorganising his army, Ahuitzotl had to immediately return to the Gulf Coast to put down a Huaxtec rebellion. Sometimes the mere threat of military action would be enough – other times, the Triple Alliance would have to reconquer such territories.

Having painstakingly secured his holdings, Ahuitzotl attempted to bypass and outflank the Tarascans, seizing the coast of Guerrero, in southern Mexico, and scoring lucrative trade routes. The king also set up a network of client states along the border with the Tarascans, building a fortress at Oztoma in the south and fortifying it with colonists from the Valley of Mexico. He also secured an alliance with the Zapotecs, by marrying his daughter to their king – giving the Aztecs military access through Zapotec lands.

As a warrior-king who personally led his men into battle, Ahuitzotl recognised the virtue of martial prowess, lavishing generous promotions on warriors who performed well and nominating many a fighter to eagle warrior status. He not only propelled the empire to new military and financial heights, but the Mexica too – taking on more and more powers from the other Triple Alliance kings. He used some of his wealth to build a second aqueduct in Tenochtitlán to help provide enough water for the city's 60,000 houses and 300,000 residents. However, this later led to flooding in 1502; as residents scrambled to the safety of 32,000 canoes and rafts, Ahuitzotl was struck and killed by a stray stone lintel.



Moctezuma II's reign was plagued by ill omens, and marked the beginning of the end for the Aztecs

After his death, his nephew Moctezuma II was nominated supreme speaker. The leader was, in some respects, wise; often visiting Tenochtitlán in disguise, offering bribes to judges and spying on projects, to see if his orders were being adhered to. He was also a brilliant general, having personally led 43 military victories. However, unlike his uncle, he desired not to be loved, but feared. He eliminated the eagle warrior status – destroying the ladder that had propelled so many talented commoners up the social hierarchy – and reserved all important government posts for Mexica nobles. He simultaneously massacred Ahuitzotl's officials, replacing them with loyalists – while filling the palace with the sons of distant leaders, virtually holding them hostage.

Having inherited an empire at its peak, Moctezuma shone a harsh light on its shoddy foundations. It was a society dominated by a rigid and vast class division, with a state religion designed to instil fear in the common man, with no recourse nor opportunity to voice themselves. Nobles were far wealthier and enjoyed more basic rights than the commoners – upon whose backs the empire was protected, fed and sustained. With its growth, the empire's population had exploded – multiplying fivefold in the 14th century alone – and now there were millions of hungry Aztec mouths to feed. However, if the Aztec world had grown more prosperous, the commoners certainly had not noticed. On the contrary, taxes were higher – paid to a distant master who, to many, only derived authority from their superior military size. The insatiable Aztec appetite for tribute led it on an endless campaign of expansion which, in turn, created a greater need for funds to pamper the growing nobility, and provide for the army. Though the military was large enough to quell rebellions, it was not large enough to maintain constant order across the board.

One of Moctezuma's first acts was to reconquer distant holdings, while maintaining war with the Nahuatl-speaking Tlaxcala, east of the Acolhua. Like the Tarascans, their city-state had never been conquered. Though the Aztecs surrounded the Tlaxcalans with a web of client states, isolating them, they never managed to defeat them – even after numerous battles where Moctezuma seemed to be on the cusp of victory. He did, however, take the coastal Mixtec state of Tututepec and pushed east towards Tabasco.

Numerous omens were said to have occurred during Moctezuma's reign, culminating in the arrival of Hernando Cortés and his conquistadors. Ruling from the most splendid palace in Aztec history, it would have been hard for the supreme speaker to see the tide turn. While the Aztecs had spent the better part of a century establishing the predominant Mesoamerican empire, seemingly ordained by the gods, it all came crumbling down faster than any could have ever imagined. For all its strengths, to most its subjects, the Triple Alliance was little more than a bully; one who used its superior might to extort protection money, under threat of oppression. As the Spanish stood over the rubble of an empire that took its supremacy for granted, its foundations were telling; despite the myths, blood and temples, the Aztec empire had always been on borrowed time.

> "The insatiable Aztec appetite for tribute led them on an endless campaign of expansion"

The Tarascans

Though the Aztecs never got along with their western neighbours, they shared much in common

Like the Aztecs, the Tarascans settled in a highland basin, around Lake Pátzcuaro. They too had grown from small settlements into city-states, before conquering a regional empire, led by a pre-eminent dynasty centred around the imperial capital of Tzintzuntzan. However, the Tarascans exercised direct control over its provinces with forced repopulations and regional governors. They worshipped numerous gods, notably Cuerauáperi, the earth goddess of creation, Curicaueri, the sun god and Xaratanga, the moon goddess of fertility.

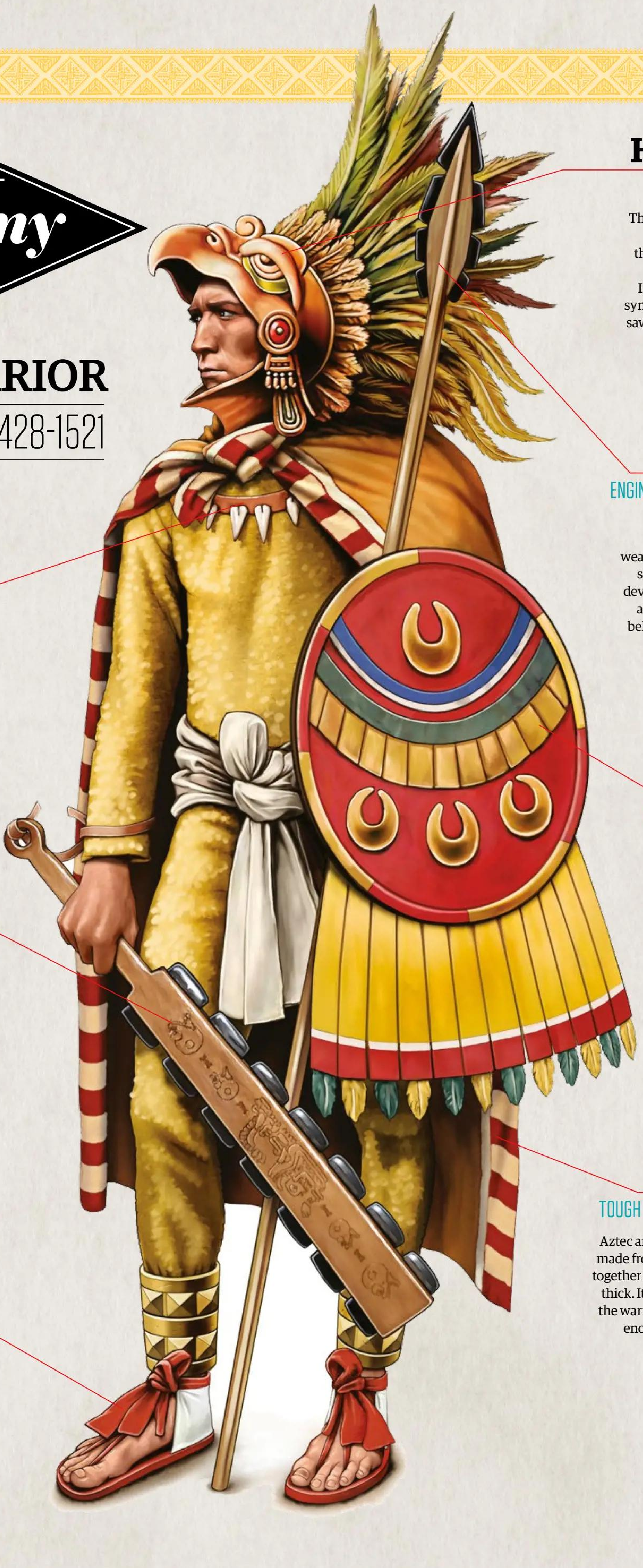
The Tarascans were also masters of metalwork. Their advanced technology allowed them to craft superior armour and weapons of copper and bronze. Some of the peripheral towns the Aztecs captured boasted metalsmiths, and by the time of its demise, the empire was on the cusp of adopting Tarascan copper and bronze smelting techniques – with Tarascan-inspired copper needles, awls and chisels making their way into the Tlatelolco market. Similarly, obsidian blades from Aztec-controlled Pachuca appeared in Tarascan markets, indicating that despite tensions, merchants frequently travelled between the two empires, selling otherwise unavailable technology to the commoners.

The Tarascans were decimated by the same Euro-African diseases that plagued the Aztecs, reaching the capital by 1519, and killing the ruler Zuangua the next year. By the time the Spanish arrived in 1522, the empire – reeling from the devastation of its noble and military classes – was in no state to resist. Though its cazonci (overlord) retained nominal powers, Tzintzuntzan began decaying into an insignificant village just decades after the execution of its final leader, Tangaxuan II, at the hands of conquistador Nuño de Guzmán.

THE *Anatomy of*

EAGLE WARRIOR

CENTRAL MEXICO, 1428-1521



JEWELLERY

A DECORATED SOLDIER WITH BENEFITS

Eagle warriors were high-ranking members of Aztec society and were awarded certain privileges as a result. For example, they were given tax-free land, permitted to keep mistresses, eat human flesh and allowed to wear fine jewellery that was not available to the general public.

MACUAHUITL

A DOUBLE-SIDED WEAPON

This popular Aztec weapon was a flat wooden club with blades of volcanic glass, called obsidian, fixed to the sides. It allowed warriors to either injure their enemy with the blunt sides so that they could capture them for sacrifice, or deliver a more fatal blow with the sharp edges.

SANDALS

FOOTWEAR PRIVILEGES AND LEATHERY LEGS

Regular Aztec citizens were not permitted to wear cotton or sandals in the royal palaces, but the eagle warriors could. In addition to their leather footwear, they would also cover their legs with extra strips of leather, called greaves, during battle for added protection.

HEADDRESS

FEATHERED FRIEND OR FOE

The warriors' headdresses resembled an eagle's head with an open beak that they could look out of, and were decorated with the bird's feathers. In Aztec mythology, the eagle was a symbol of the sun, and so the warriors saw themselves as soldiers of the sun.

SPEAR

ENGINEERED FOR A POWERFUL THROW

Tipped with razor-sharp obsidian, spears were a popular long-range weapon used by the Aztecs. They were sometimes thrown using an atlatl, a device that hooked onto the spear and acted as a lever, putting more power behind the weapon so that it could be thrown at a higher velocity.

SHIELD

PAINTED PROTECTION IN BATTLE

Each eagle warrior had a small round shield called a chimalli, which was made from wood and twisted plant fibres. It was carried using leather straps and decorated with colourful painted designs and eagle feathers. Alternatively, some soldiers used shields made from thick cotton that could be rolled up while marching.

ARMOUR

TOUGH TEXTILES THAT KEEP THEIR COOL

Aztec armour, known as ichcahuipilli, was made from quilted cotton and jute blended together until it was one or two centimetres thick. It was lightweight and breathable in the warm Mexican climate, but also strong enough to protect against strikes from obsidian swords, bows and spears.

© Kevin McGivern

A day in the life of a Telpochcalli student

LIFE WAS TOUGH FOR WARRIORS IN TRAINING CENTRAL MEXICO, 1428-1521

For the sons of lower class Aztec citizens, military service was mandatory and their training was provided by schools called tēlpochcalli. There was at least one tēlpochcalli in each calpulli, or city ward, and they were staffed by accomplished veteran soldiers often only slightly older than the students. Boys trained at these schools from the age of 15, having previously been educated at home by their parents, and were taught discipline, bravery and respect through hard labour and brutal punishments. If they achieved success as warriors, they could elevate their status in society and even become teachers themselves, helping to secure the future of the Aztec Empire.

START WORK

Each morning began with a cold bath, followed by domestic chores such as sweeping, cleaning and farming to help teach the students discipline. They were then required to work in teams, building and repairing aqueducts, canals and other city infrastructure as a way of encouraging cooperation and strengthening their sense of civic duty.

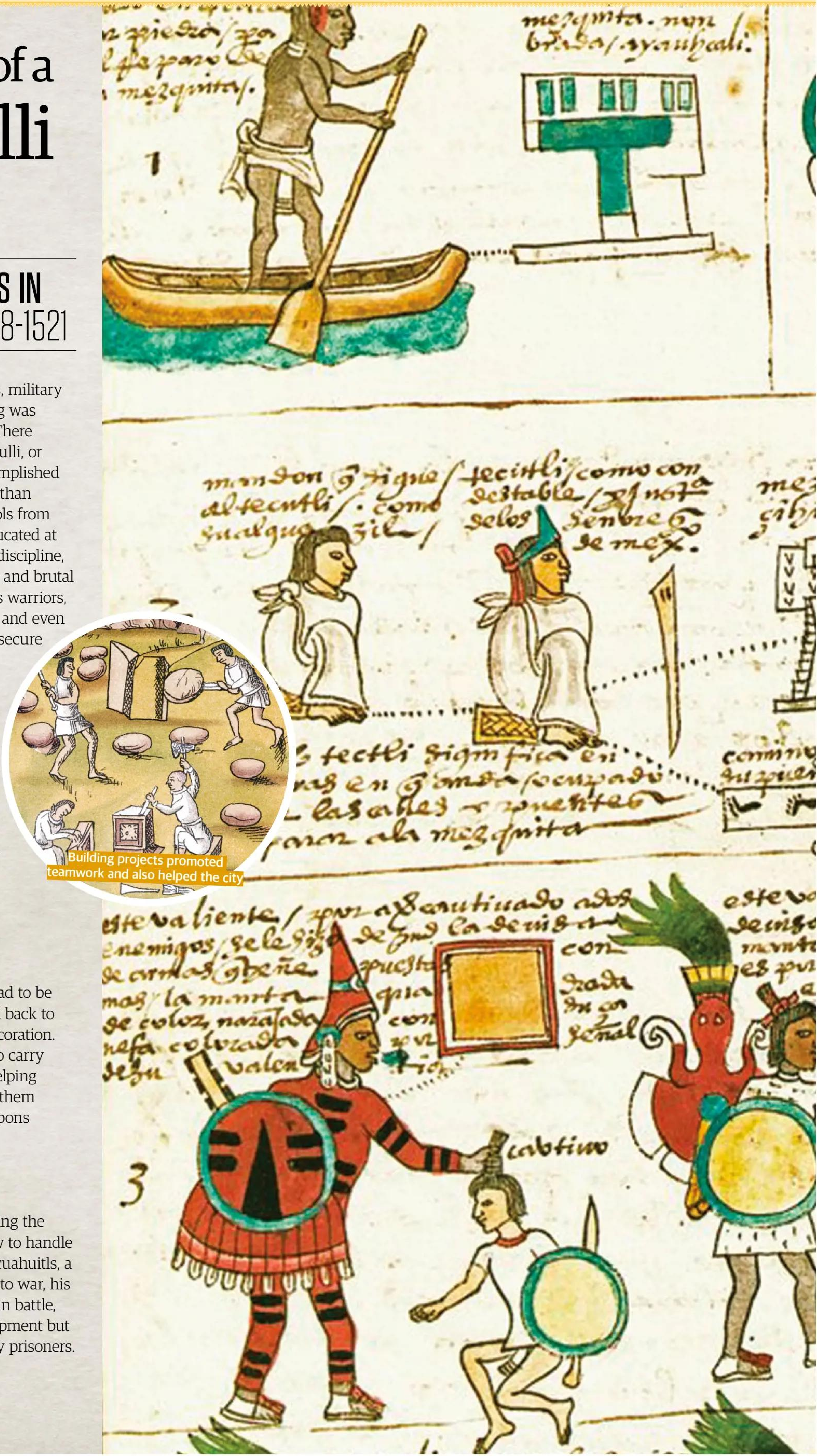
Building projects promoted teamwork and also helped the city

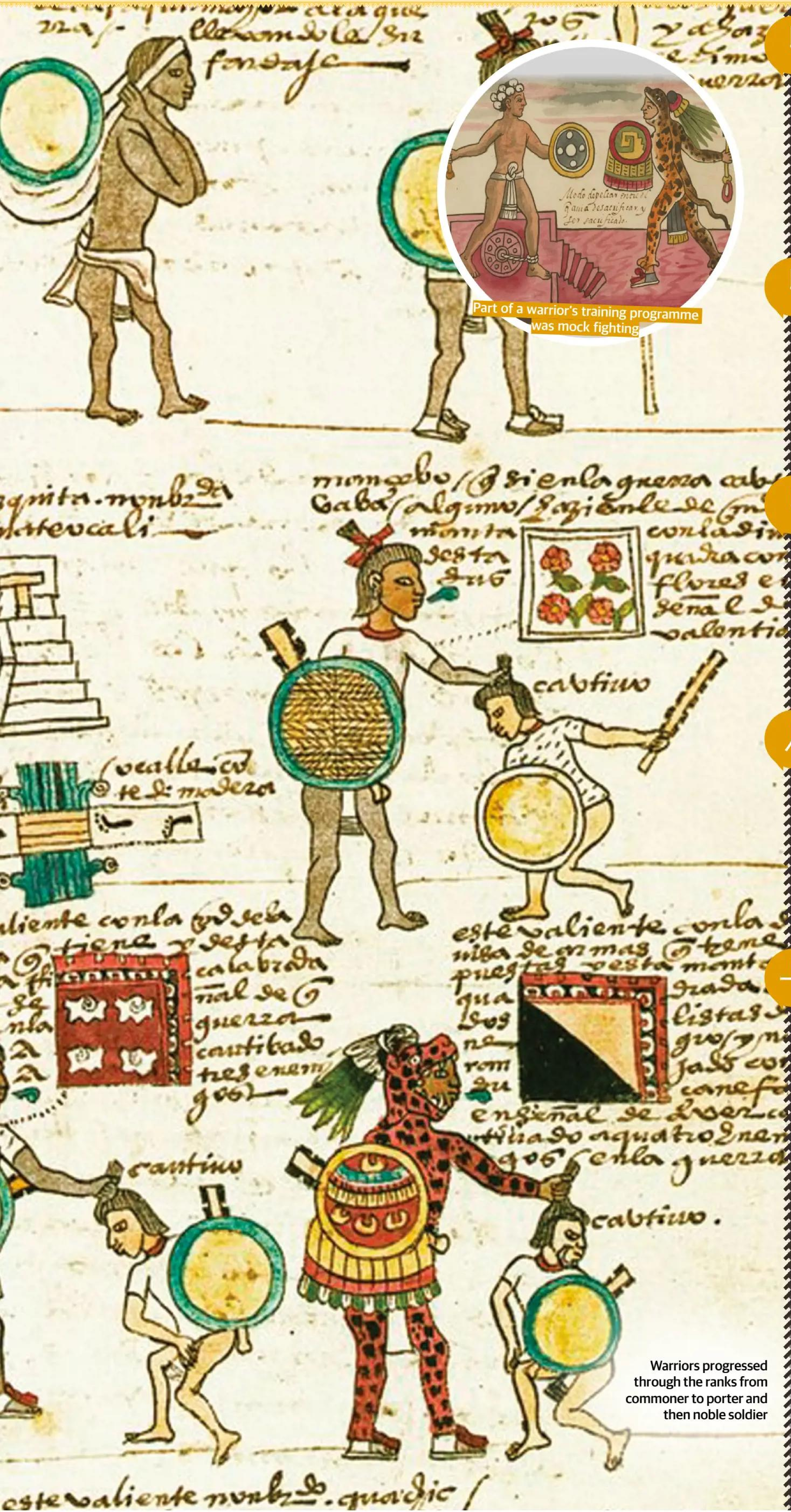
HEAVY LIFTING

Every day, firewood and tree branches had to be collected from nearby forests and carried back to the school to be used for heating and decoration. As the boys got older, they would have to carry more and more weight on their backs, helping to build up their strength and preparing them for transporting heavy supplies and weapons into battle.

COMBAT TRAINING

Veteran warriors were tasked with teaching the boys martial arts and showing them how to handle weapons such as spears, arrows and macuahuitls, a type of Aztec sword. If the veteran went to war, his students would serve as his apprentices in battle, at first tasked with just carrying his equipment but eventually helping him to capture enemy prisoners.





Part of a warrior's training programme was mock fighting

Warriors progressed through the ranks from commoner to porter and then noble soldier

PLAY PRETEND

Before they were allowed to fully participate in a battle on their own, the students first practised their skills in mock fights. These were sometimes held as part of religious festivals, when the boys would be up against enemy prisoners who had been captured in war, or they were staged between students as competitions, with the winner receiving food and gifts as his prize.

FIND A SPONSOR

By the time a boy left school he was a warrior, but he still couldn't go to war alone. First he had to find a sponsor, a veteran who could accompany him into his first battle. Parents would use food, drink and gifts to bribe these veterans to watch over their sons, and so it was usually the richer boys who had greater success in war.

TAKE A BEATING

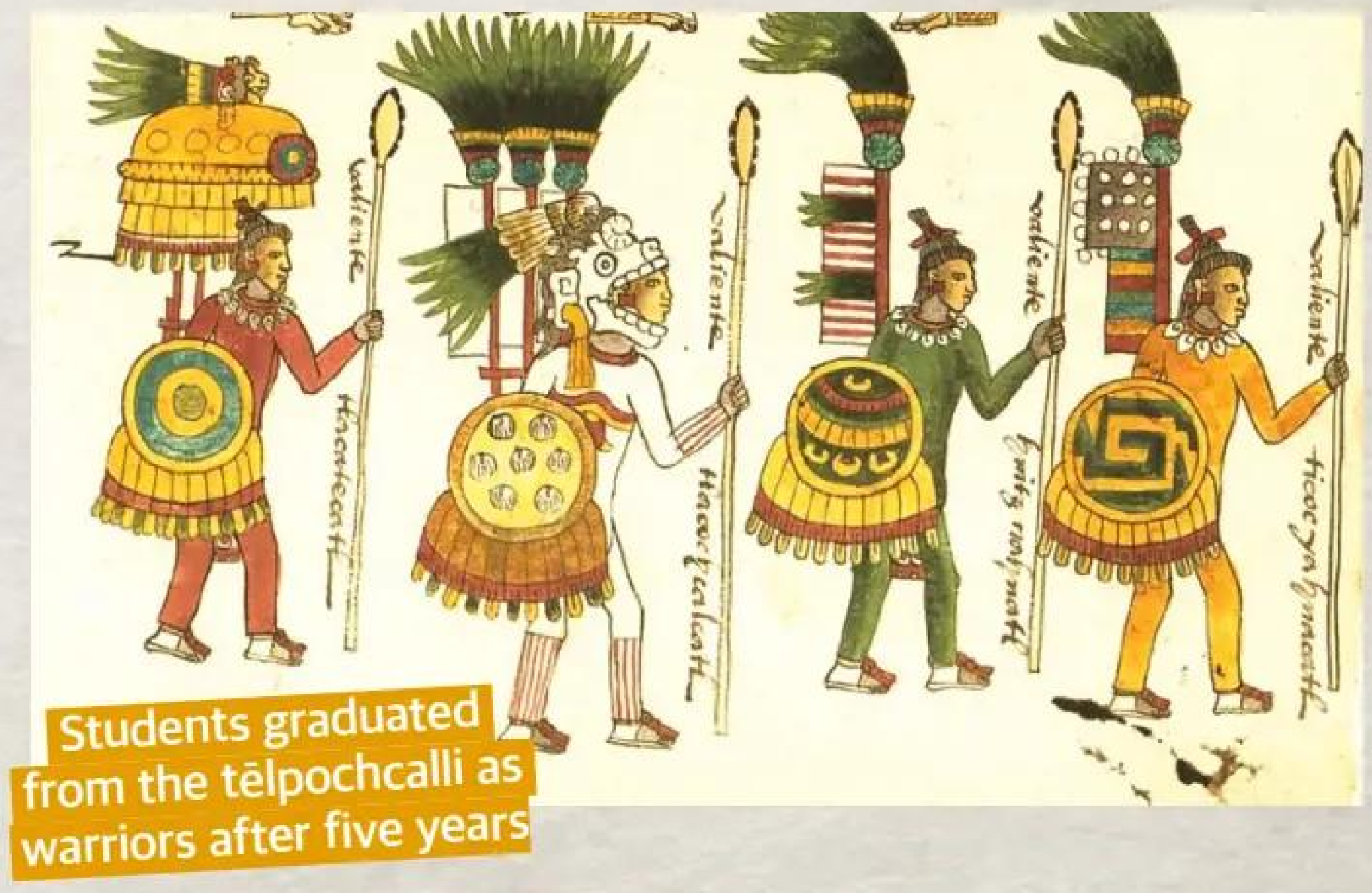
The rules of the telpochcallis were strict and anyone who broke them or deviated from their training was severely punished. For example, a student caught with alcohol could be beaten or even hanged, and leaving school to live with a prostitute warranted being burnt with a stick. Even the teachers could be punished, with their valuables taken and hair cut if they misbehaved.

EAT AND BATHE

The students had to return home for all of their meals, as food was not provided by the tēlpochcalli. After eating, they would return to school to continue their training and then perform their evening rituals at sunset. This involved having a bath before painting their entire bodies black, putting on a mesh cape and neckbands and then lighting a fire.

SING AND DANCE

After sunset, the students gathered to sing songs about gods, warriors and cultural heroes and dance around the fire until midnight. This encouraged spiritual bonding, improved agility and enhanced coordination ready for hand-to-hand combat and troop movement in battle. This was their only form of entertainment, although they were permitted to keep a mistress if they could afford one.



Students graduated from the tēlpochcalli as warriors after five years

© Alamy

THE AZTEC DOWNFALL

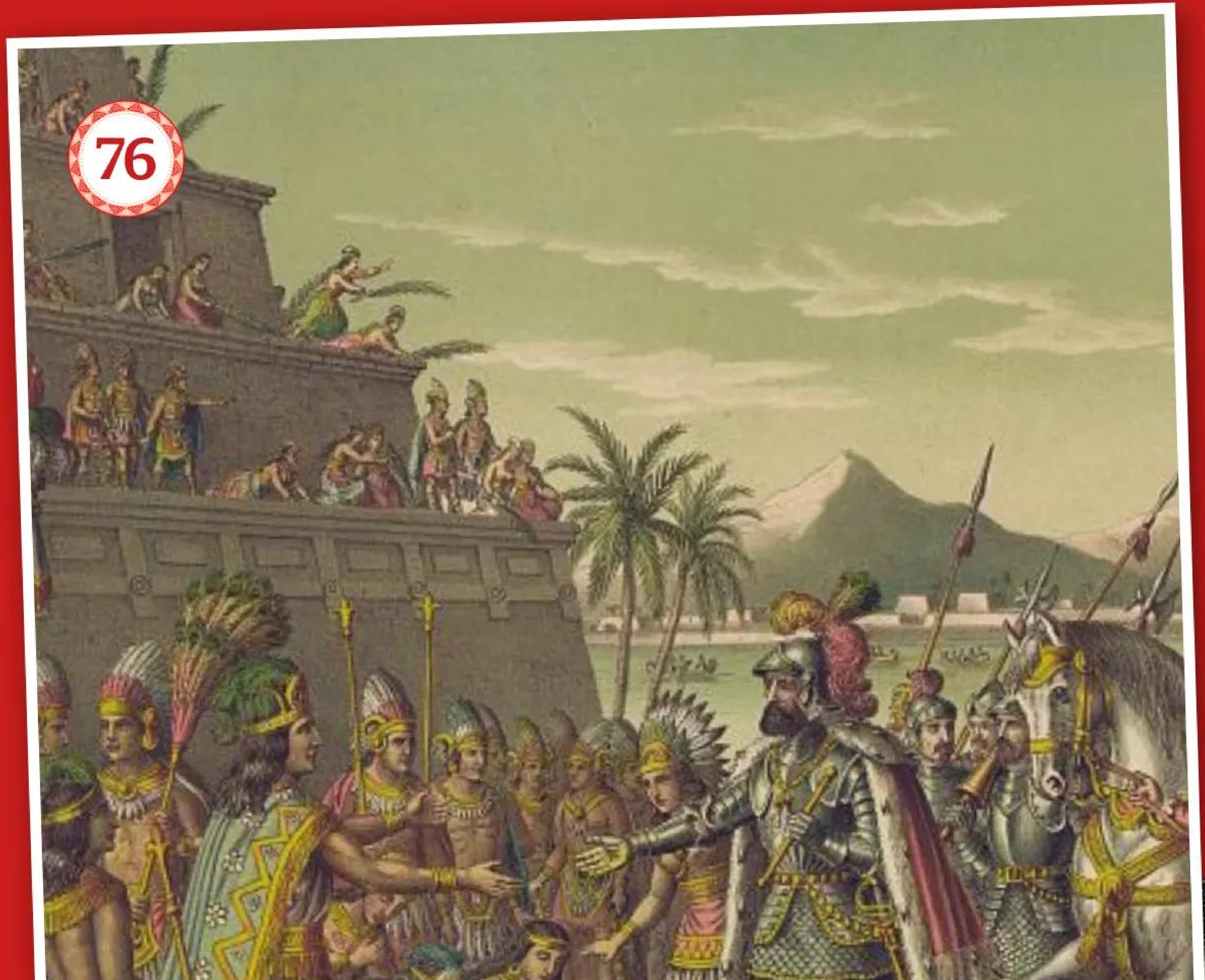
Follow the disastrous downfall of a centuries-old empire, and see what happened next

76 **Hernán Cortés**

80 **The Fall of the Aztecs**

90 **After the Spanish Invasion**

94 **What if the Aztecs weren't defeated?**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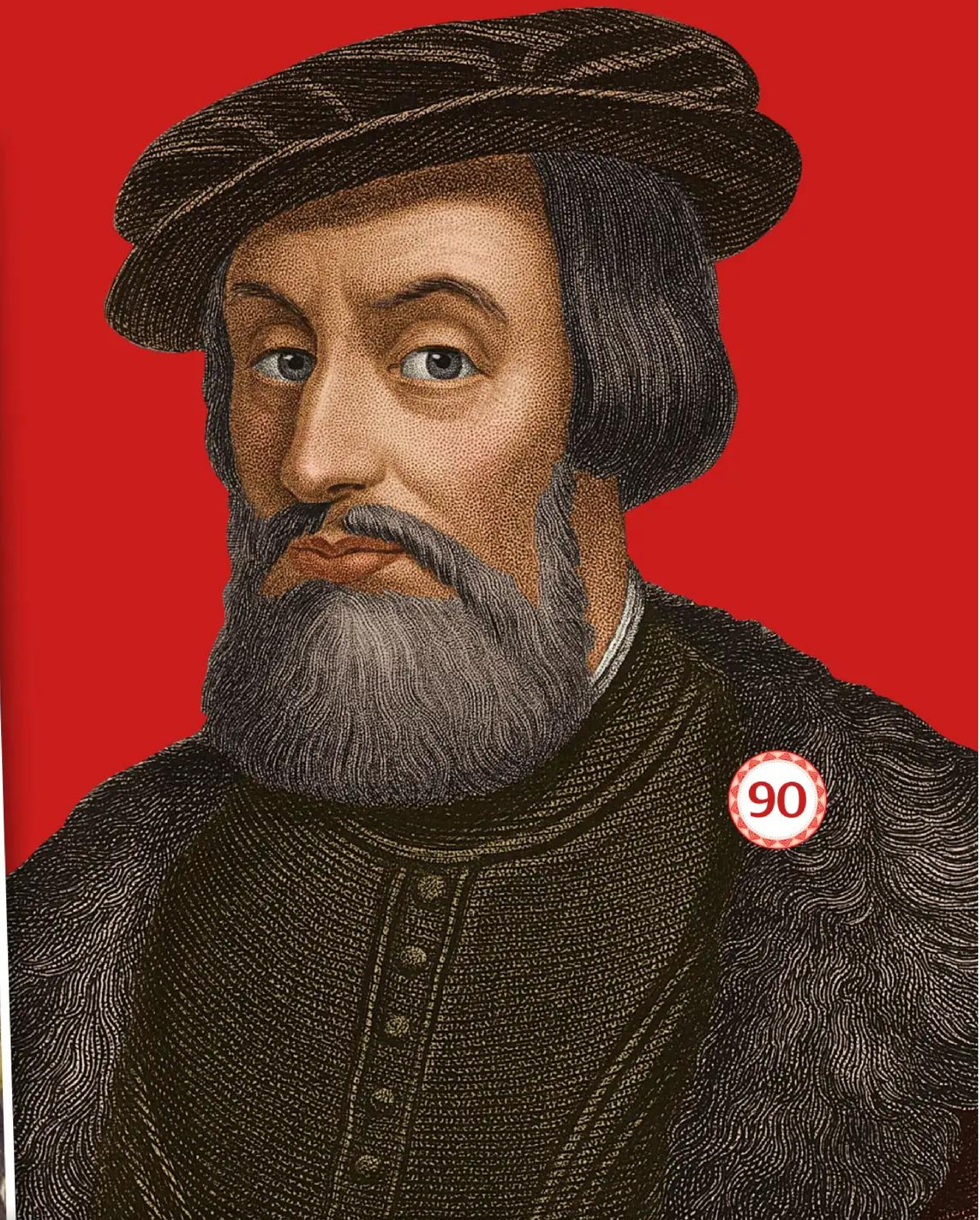
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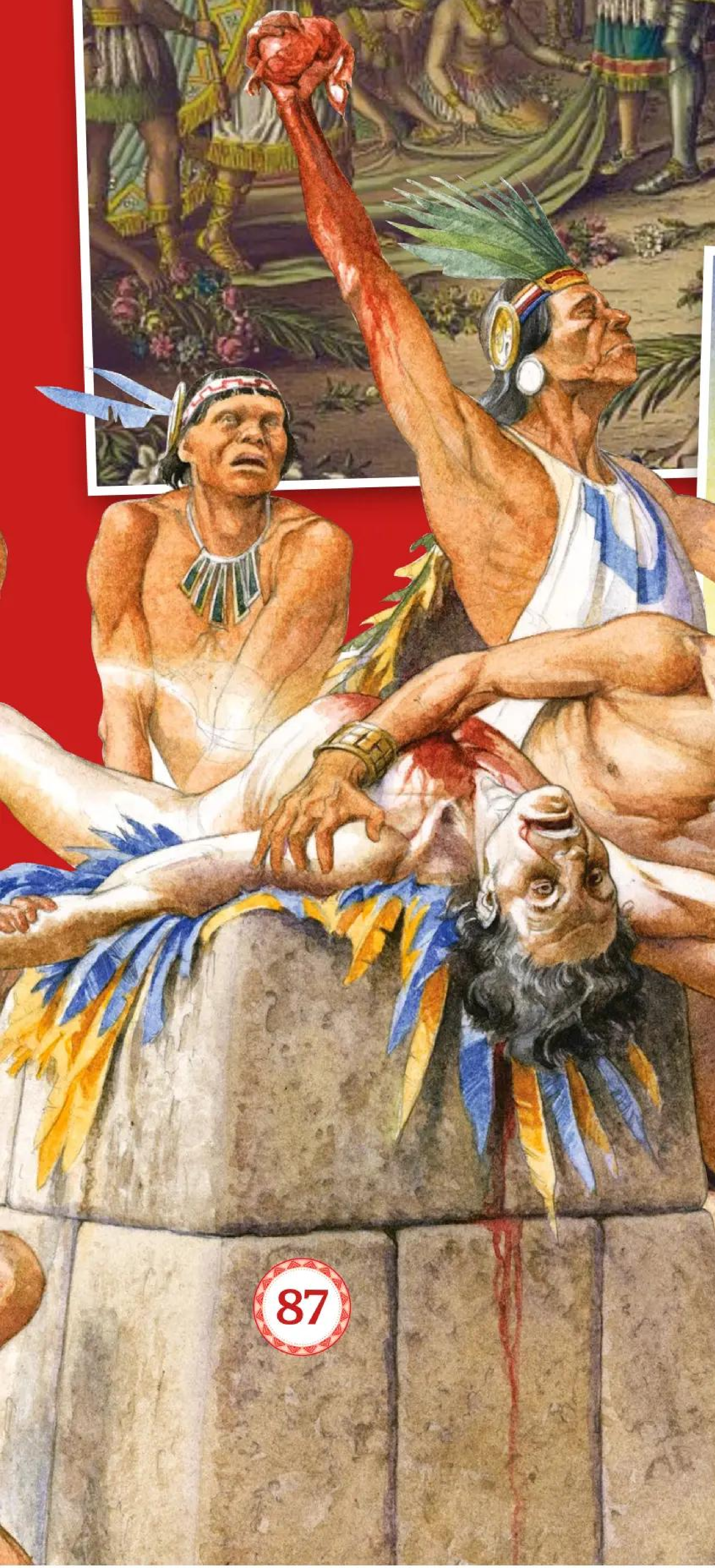
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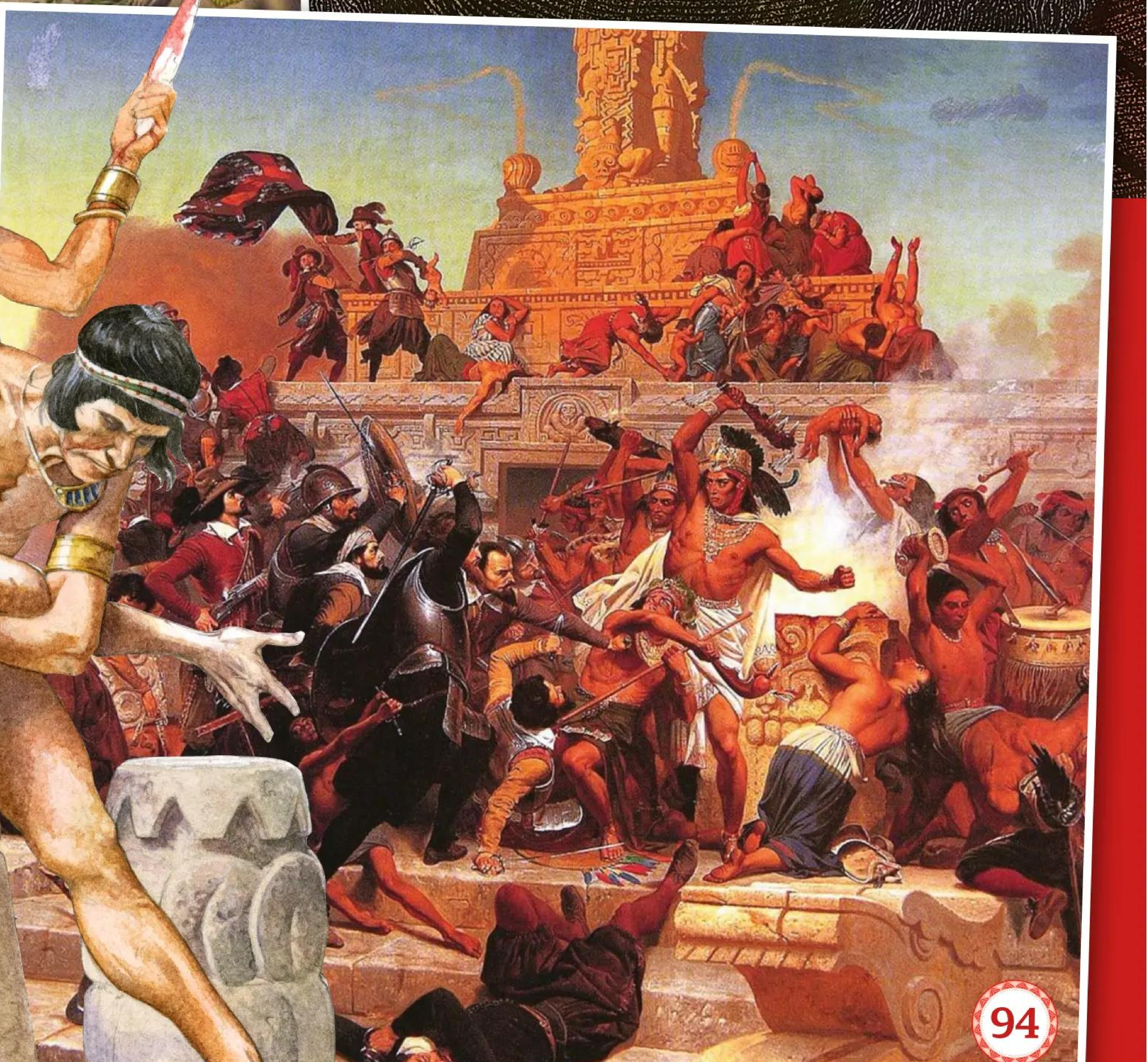
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Hernán Cortés

The adventures of the infamous 16th-century Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés and his brutal conquest of the Americas

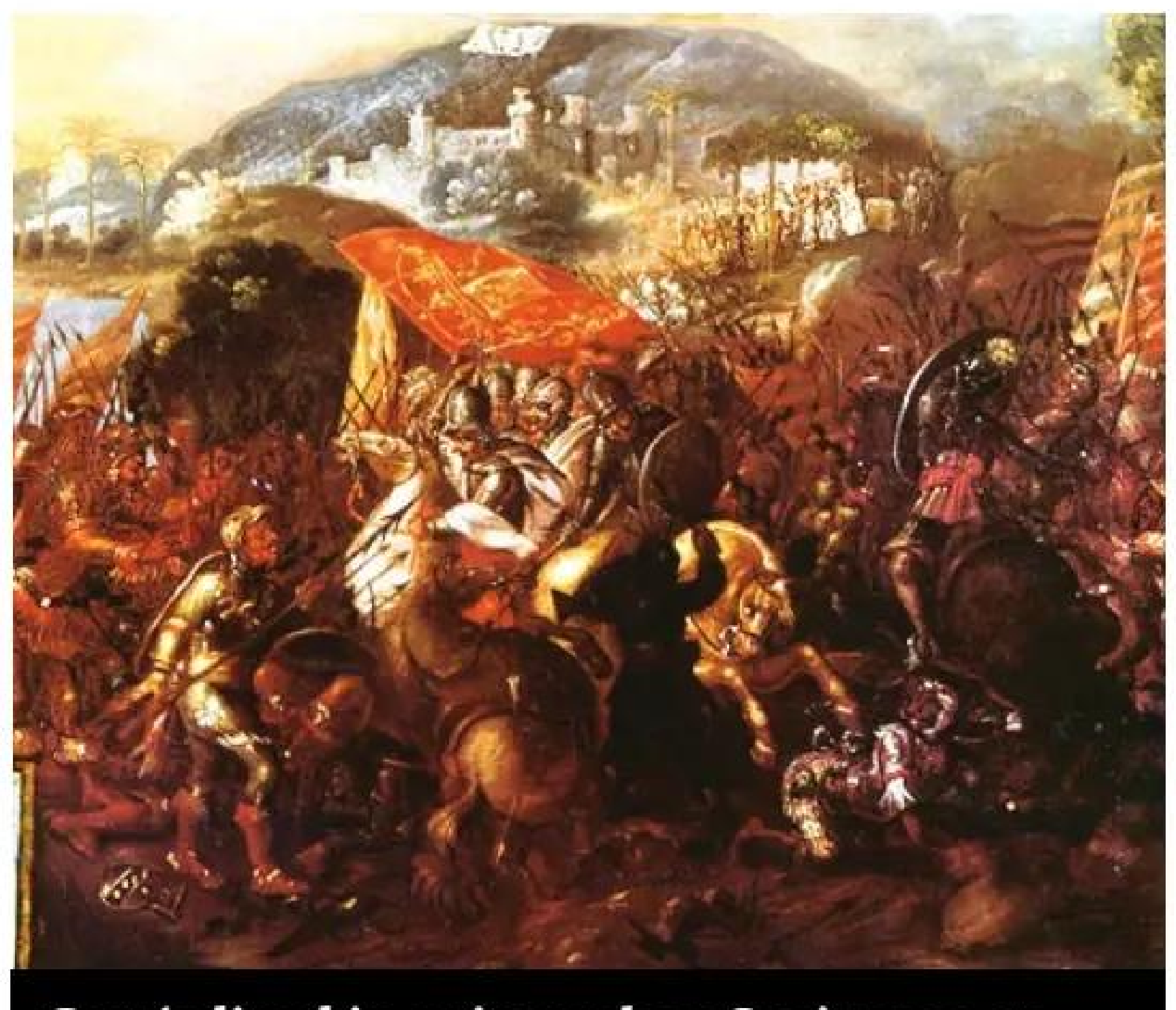
Written by Chris Fenton

When Hernán Cortés walked through the burning city of Tenochtitlán in 1521 he couldn't be happier. He'd done it. He had endured the jungle, the heat, the hostile natives and the bureaucratic fools in Spain. He had taken the Americas, destroyed the pagan empire of the Aztecs and opened up its wonders for the glory of Spain and, of course, for himself. He glanced at the looting of the natives' precious metals and the raping of Aztec women in their orderly, architecturally advanced thoroughfares, and dismissed it as fortunes of war; a war that he had won. He could see some of his conquistadors destroy one of the natives' strange idols, and force the people around it to bow to the Christian cross. He was doing God's work and as he was about this glorious task, he was making a ton of money for himself. The siege of Tenochtitlán represented the peak of Cortés's blood-stained career in the New World, a career that would destroy cities and slaughter thousands in his endless quest for riches and glory.

Colombus was the first to bring back cocoa beans from the new world, but it was Cortés who discovered their use as a drink

Few historical figures match the unquenchable greed of Cortés. He was a man of action out to make his fortune. He wasn't satisfied with a quiet life in the Spanish court listening to the endless bickering and squabbling, or the slow tedium of the Spanish provisional community. After dropping out of Salamanca University in 1501 through boredom, he decided he would strike out on his own, having been shunned by his family as 'mischievous, quarrelsome and a source of trouble.' He travelled to the Spanish port towns, cosmopolitan and wild, where he could reinvent himself among the exotic, tantalising trading communities. He enjoyed their delights - chiefly womanising and gambling - while listening to tales of wondrous opportunity from the sailors and conquistadors back from the New World. They would thrill him with stories of unending glory and fortune, a limitless flow of beautiful, exotic women and the chance to carve a lasting legacy in the virgin lands far across the vast ocean. He'd made up his mind. He would travel to this unexplored land and become part of the cut-throat business of exploration. With this in mind he set out for Santo Domingo (The Dominican Republic) in 1504, having just turned 19.

Cortés's early career in the New World was destructive and brutal. After contracting syphilis from various sexual liaisons in Santo Domingo, he spent seven years conquering and subduing the natives in Cuba with the Spanish conquistadores, earning a fearsome reputation among Spaniard and native alike. But these successes did not satisfy his insatiable thirst for wealth. He heard rumours of a huge city somewhere on the American mainland. A city paved with gold. A city where he could make his fortune. He quickly pulled together


Cortés lived in a time when Spain was at the centre of European politics and was the foremost colonial power in the world

Life in the time of Hernán Cortés

Spain – the world's first superpower

Spain's power during the time of Cortés was unparalleled anywhere in Europe. It was a country built on the engine of empire and the colonies in America served only to feed the treasury of the King of Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Charles used this money to expand his influence, making Spain the key player in Europe.

Religion ruled

Before the reformations in Europe, Catholicism was the dominant religion on the continent. There was no question of religious tolerance – you were either Catholic or a blasphemer. Severe punishments were exacted on anyone denying the word of God or the Christian faith. Spain spread Catholicism to its colonies, making it the dominant religion in Central and Latin America even to this day.

The great unknown

While exploration became a boom industry during this period, much of the Americas in the west and Asia in the east had yet to be explored. While European explorers could trace coastlines and make contact with some indigenous people living near the sea, there was not enough of them to make any lasting discoveries in the vast land masses that stretched beyond the coastlines.

Absolute power

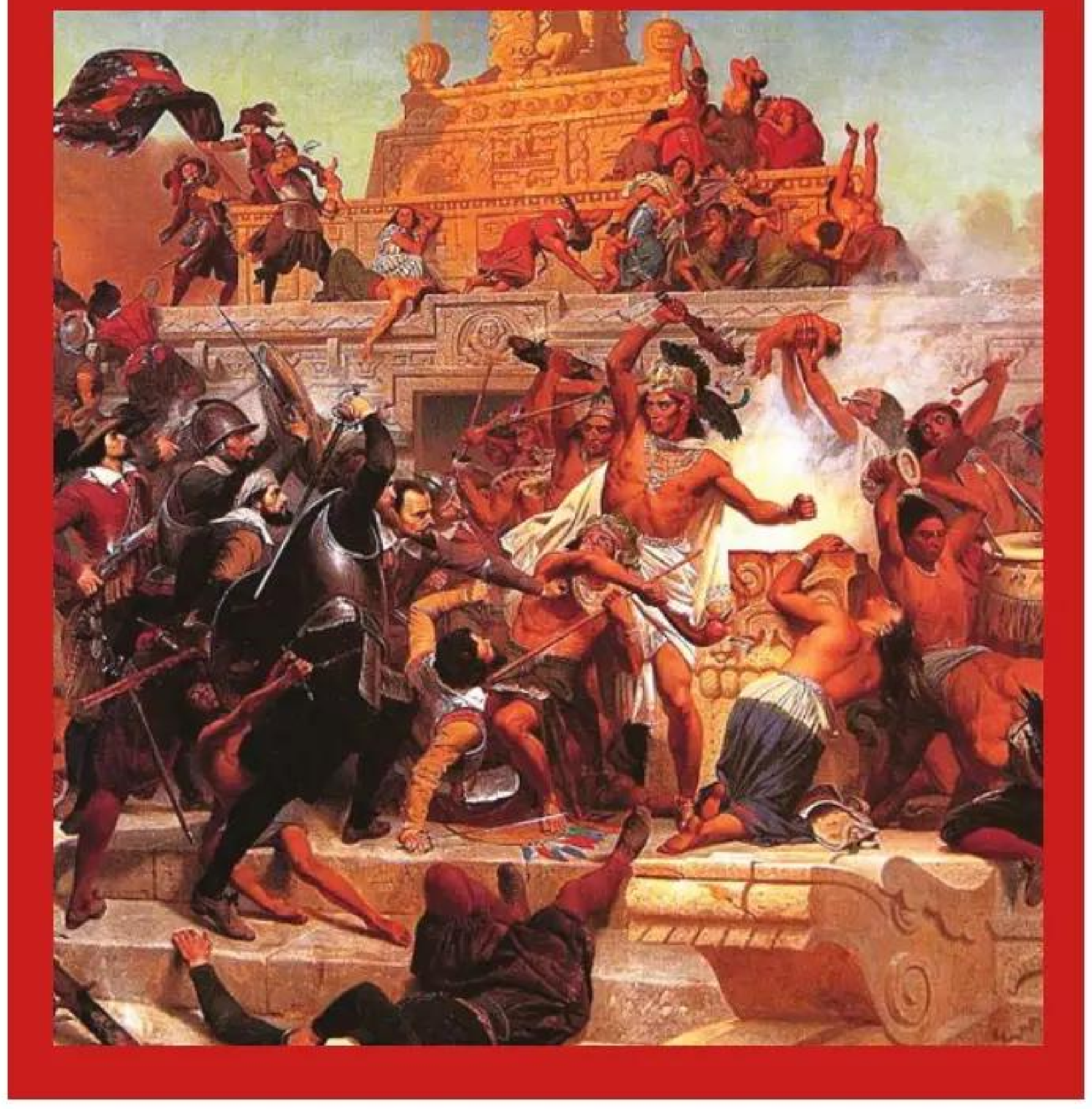
There was no such thing as democracy as we know it during the time of Cortés – Europe was governed with an iron fist by absolute monarchs. This was seen as virtuous since it was God who decided who should rule, not the people. Anyone disputing this hierarchy was not only going against their ruler but also against God and divine right.

The courtly gentlemen

It was the gentlemen of the royal courts that made the wheels turn in the great European countries in the time of Cortés. However, it was not enough to just have this position, you had to behave in a courtly manner and act virtuously and godly at all times. Anyone who didn't would be shunned from court, often to the colonies and away from the centres of power.

Conquistador soldier vs. Aztec warrior

Cortés did battle with thousands of Aztec warriors during his campaign of exploration in Central America. They were a fearsome people from warrior societies based around two predators – the eagle and the jaguar. Many dressed in the image of these animals to terrify enemies. Warriors could only join these societies if they had captured enemy soldiers or become renowned as great warriors through the rank and file of the Aztec military. Their weapon of choice was the macuahuitl sword, a club-like weapon with obsidian blades sticking out of the ends, which the warriors would use to beat their victims to death. Up against these deadly warriors were the conquistadors. They were rarely regular soldiers, although most of Cortés' men would have had some military experience. They were few in number and weighed down with armour and cumbersome European weapons. While they could hold their own against a small number of Aztec warriors, killing them from a distance with musket fire or using swords to slice through their thin armour, there simply weren't enough conquistadors to take on the Aztecs by themselves. In order to bulk out this tiny army, Cortés employed the help of thousands of tribal warriors who hated the Aztecs and the outcome of many of Cortés' battles depended on these tribesmen.



> "Cortés and his motley band came across something that would take their breath away – the city of Tenochtitlán"

an expedition party and asked the governor of Santiago to seek royal assent for an expedition. Rather than wait, he set sail before the expedition was approved – he had his fortune to make.

When Cortés reached the American mainland, he quickly gained the trust of the native tribesmen in Aztec territory, his skill as a cunning negotiator cutting through the barriers of culture and language. He realised that it was the Aztecs who controlled the vast wealth in the region and, because of this, were hated by many of the tribes in the area. Sensing an opportunity to recruit people would help him fulfil his ambitions, so he made trades that sealed allegiances and one of these included a slave girl, Manlintzin, given as a gift by the Tabasco coastal tribe. The Spanish called her Dona Marina and Cortés, whose lust for gold was only exceeded by his lust for women, was delighted with her beauty and interpretation skills. He would quickly form an intimate relationship with her that lasted throughout his adventures in the Americas.

After months of trekking through the jungle, Cortés and his motley band came across something that would take their breath away – the city of Tenochtitlán. Rather than the simple huts and forest dwellings of the tribes they had seen before, they had found 'a city built in water, all made of stone which seemed like an enchanted vision... some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream'. After an initially warm welcome, Moctezuma II, ruler of the Aztecs, grew hostile to Cortés, especially when Cortés started acquiring more and more Aztec treasure for himself.

> When he landed in what became known as Mexico, Cortés scuttled his fleet to remind his men that there was no going back

Fearing that Moctezuma would move against him, Cortés decided it was time to clip the wings of the all-powerful Aztec leader, holding him prisoner and persuading him to act as a vassal for the Spanish; Dona Marina's influence over Moctezuma was instrumental in making him hand control of the city over to Cortés, but this was only the beginning of Cortés' problems.

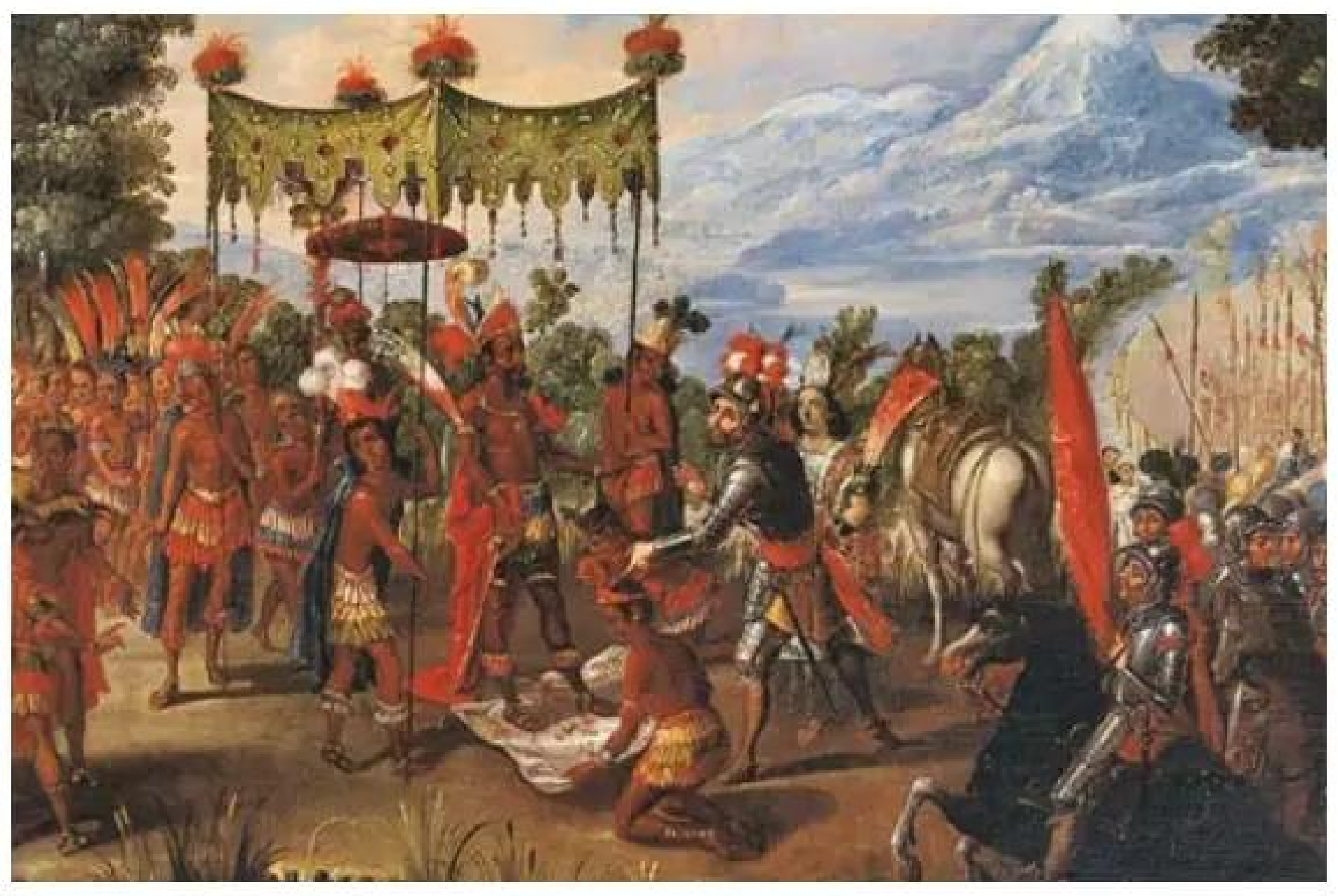
Disobeying orders, forming alliances without permission, stealing treasure and running roughshod over other peoples' countries rarely escaped the notice of the Spanish authorities and, by 1520, Spain had sent a force out to the Americas to arrest Cortés. Never a man to be undone by legal problems, especially when money was involved, Cortés marched out of Tenochtitlán, leaving the puppet Moctezuma to rule in his stead and met the

Defining moment

Cortés meets Dona Marina

1519

Cortés meets Malintzin, known as Dona Marina after she is baptised. She becomes instrumental in serving as a translator when his expedition travels further inland, warning him of potential dangers from the various tribes and factions that made up the Aztec nation. Cortés would eventually make her his mistress and she gave him a son, Martin.

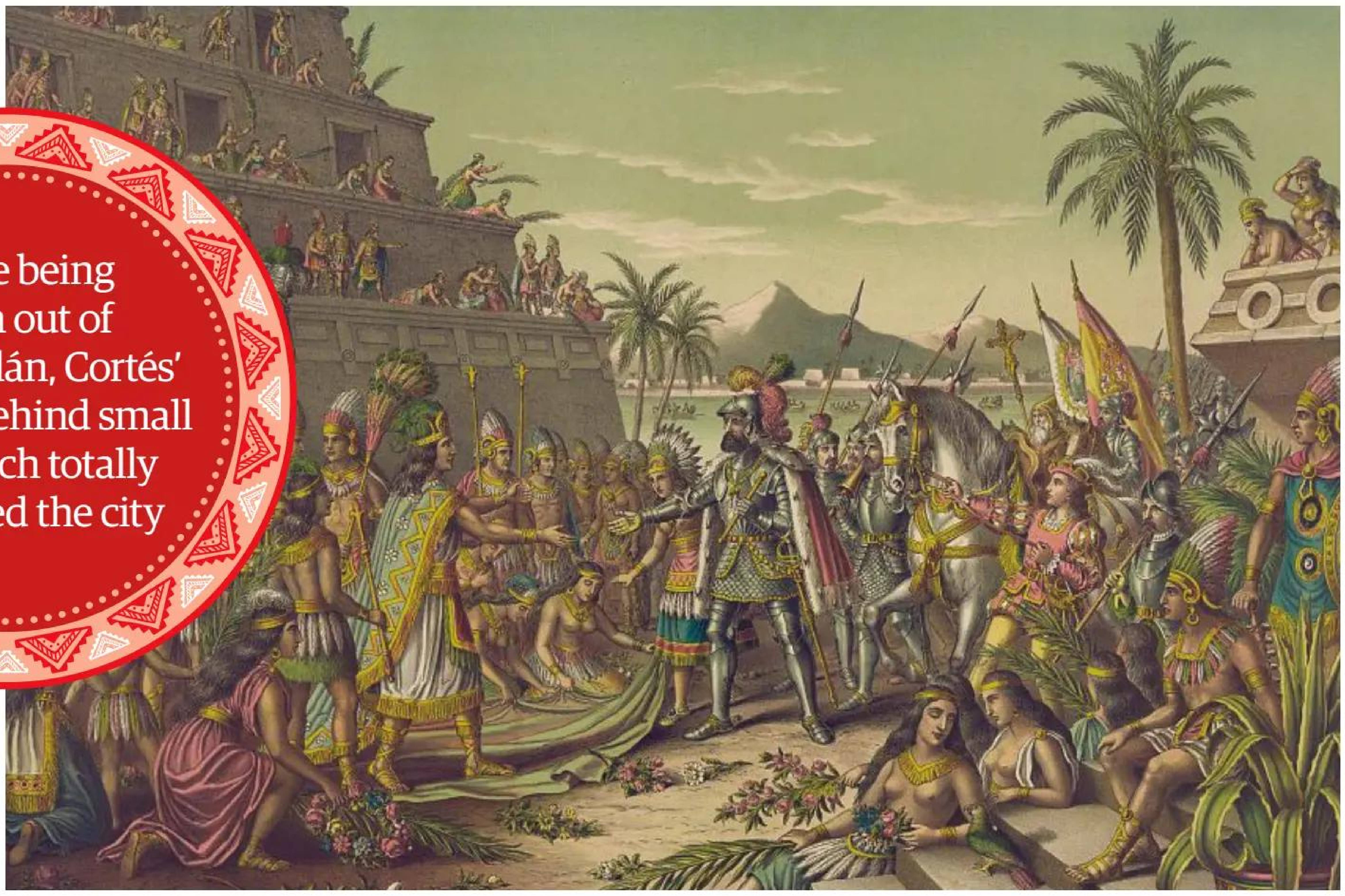


Timeline

1485

- **Birth of Hernán Cortés**
  Hernán Cortés is born in Medellín to Martin Cortés de Monroy and Dona Catalina Pizarro Altamarino, a family of relatively minor nobility.
  1485

- **University drop out**
  Cortés decides to drop out of studying law and returns home, much to the disgust and dismay of his parents, who had hopes he would become a lawyer.
  1501
- **The New World**
  Tempted by the countless stories from abroad, Cortés leaves Spain for the New World, heading initially for Santo Domingo, the modern-day Dominican Republic.
  1504
- **American mainland**
  Cortés leaves Santiago (Cuba) and sets sail for the American mainland in search of fortune, fame, adventure and the unknown. He does so without any permission from the Spanish authorities.
  1518
- **First colony**
  Cortés establishes the first colony on the coast of the American mainland, naming it Veracruz, before pushing further inland through the uncharted and treacherous jungle, seeking greater wealth and treasure.
  1519



Before being driven out of Tenochtitlán, Cortés' men left behind small pox, which totally devastated the city

approaching conquistadors. After some tentative negotiations and a reassurance that there was enough booty for everyone, the soldiers sent to arrest Cortés joined him. However, by the time he returned to Tenochtitlán the Aztecs had rebelled against him after his forces had butchered some of their holy men during a festival. Cortés did not have enough men to put down the rebellion and was running short on food. He took decisive action and fed the Moctezuma to the enraged crowd who, according to some accounts, was stoned to death. Cortés then grabbed as much loot as he could find, gathering his men and fighting his way out of the city. In one of history's worst heists, Cortés overloaded his men with too much gold, causing them to fall through the weak bridges over the lakes surrounding the city as they tried to get away. Many conquistadors drowned in what is remembered as the 'sorrowful night' and Cortés swore he'd be back to retake his prize.

In the next six months Cortés used his considerable negotiating skills to acquire reinforcements from the Caribbean and make more alliances with the local tribes, acquiring thousands of native warriors. He had also brought with him an unseen ally: small pox. One of his men had passed it on to the Aztecs before they left Tenochtitlán. As the Aztecs starved and suffered the agony of the smallpox pustules, Cortés set about destroying the city for four months, building by building, in a systematic and brutal slaughter. When the Aztecs finally surrendered, he took their new leader, Cuauhtemoc, and tortured him to find out where the rest of the treasures of the city were hidden. After months of exhausting warfare, Cortés was determined to get his reward.

The great Aztec Empire, which had stood for hundreds of years as a basin for advanced society in Central America, was in smouldering ruins. From now on it would be known as New Spain, of which Cortés appointed himself leader, but must have suspected there was little chance Spain would allow a man like him to stay in this powerful and politically sensitive position. After Charles V granted him his dues in title and money, he was summoned back to Spain to answer for his persistent disobedience to the state. He cleared his name, however, and continued to explore the world, thinking he could find another Tenochtitlán to make a greater fortune, but it never happened. After more incidents of insubordination he was sent back to Spain – this time for good – in his own words, 'old, poor and in debt'.

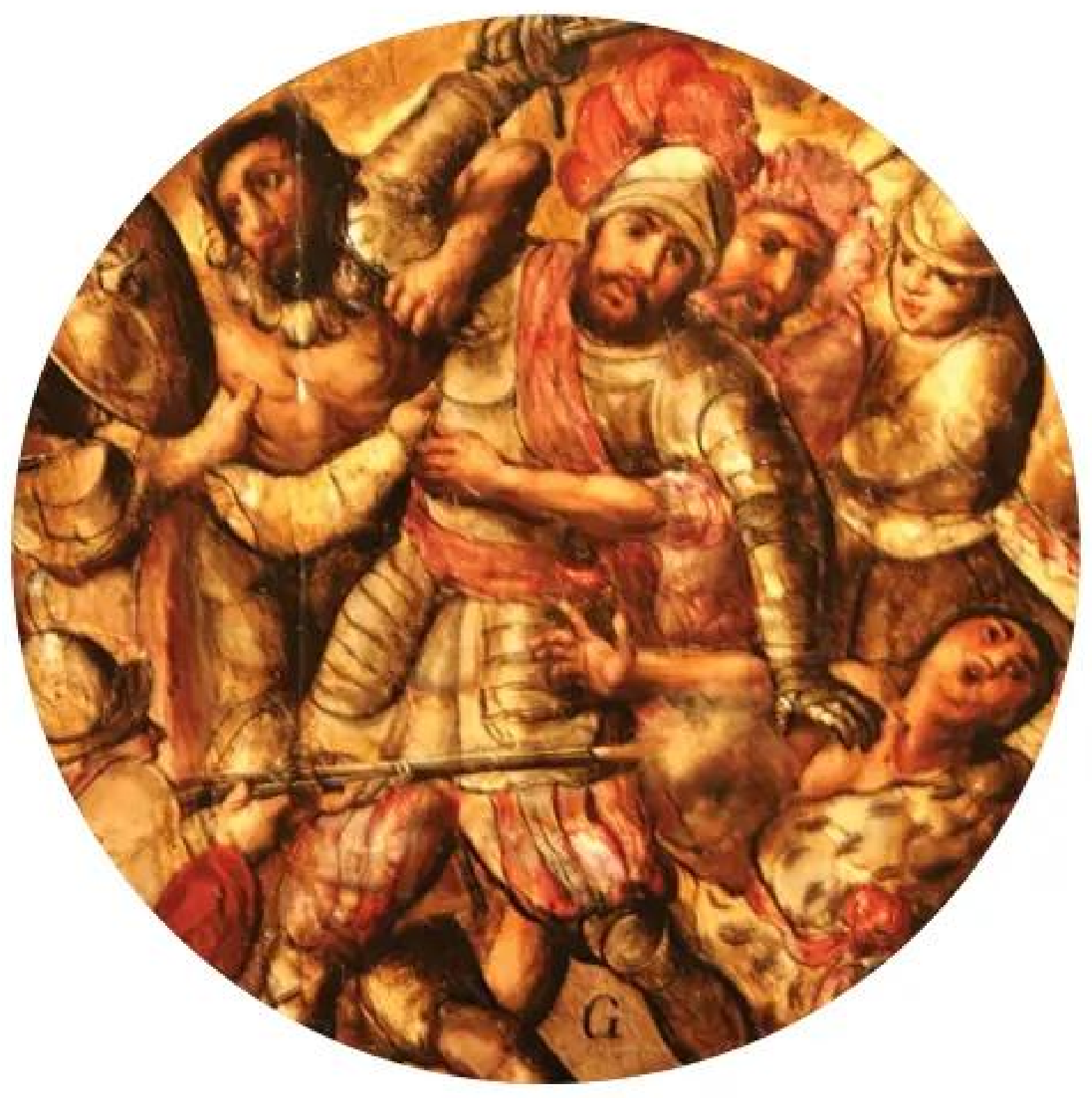
Cortés' enthusiasm, passion for glory and aspiration to shake off the shackles of mainstream society and get rich was an inspiration to his troops and the people he convinced to support his expeditions. To the native people of America he was fearsome, ruthless and akin to a devil in their mythology; he brought death and destruction wherever he went. To Cortés himself, he was a man who could always do better, get richer and live more grandly. By the time of his death in 1547 his grand designs were left unfulfilled because he ended up where he had started – in the provinces of Spain, living the life of an obscure rural lord.

Defining moment
Cortés discovers Tenochtitlán
1519

Cortés and his small band of conquistadors discover the city at the heart of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlán. They are struck by what they see; a city built upon lakes with grand boulevards, huge temples and large open markets all made of stone. They are treated as gods and, seizing this opportunity, Cortés quickly takes as much gold as he can find in the city. He then captures the Aztec ruler Moctezuma and forces him to act as a vassal for the Spanish state.

Defining moment
Tenochtitlán destroyed
1521

After months of siege warfare the city of Tenochtitlán is destroyed and eventually remains at only a quarter of its original size. When Cortés finally storms the city, its inhabitants are starving and dying of smallpox. Nearly 240,000 Aztecs die in the siege. Cortés renames Tenochtitlán Mexico City and creates the province of New Spain out of what remains of the Aztec territory. The Aztec nation ceases to exist as it once did.



1547

Aztec rebellion
After negotiating with a body of conquistadors sent to arrest him, Cortés returns to Tenochtitlán to find that the Aztecs have rebelled against Moctezuma. He is forced to quickly make his escape from the city.
1520 June

Devastating disease
The Aztecs of Tenochtitlán start developing smallpox and it brutally ravishes the population since they have no resistance to European disease.
1520 July

Tlaxcalan territory
Cortés and his by now dilapidated army reach the Tlaxcalan tribe, which they had befriended months before. Cortés now begins to rebuild his forces in preparation for a final assault on the city of Tenochtitlán.
1520 July

Recalled to Spain
Success in the field creates enemies for Cortés at home and through political intrigue he is ousted from the governorship of New Spain. He is recalled to Spain a little over a year later to answer charges including misconduct and murder.
1528

Baja California
Having successfully defended his position in Spain, Cortés returns to Mexico rejuvenated and commissions an exploration to find a route to the Pacific. However, he actually discovers California instead.
1535

Unfulfilled ambition
Cortés is forced to return to Spain, having lost much of his wealth. He dies there in poverty in 1547, while attempting to get to a ship going back to Mexico.
1547

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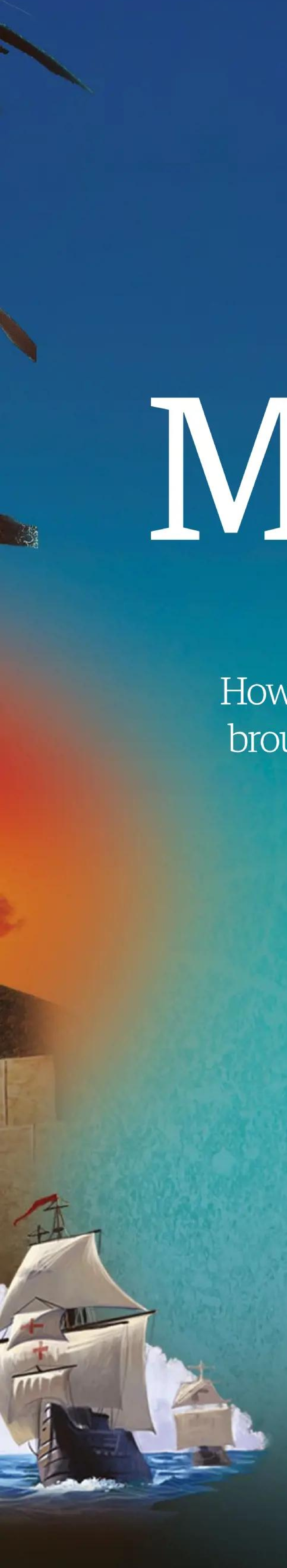


Cortés vs Moctezuma

How the most powerful civilisation in South America was brought to its knees by a Spanish conquistador driven by desire for gold and riches

Written by Robin Brown

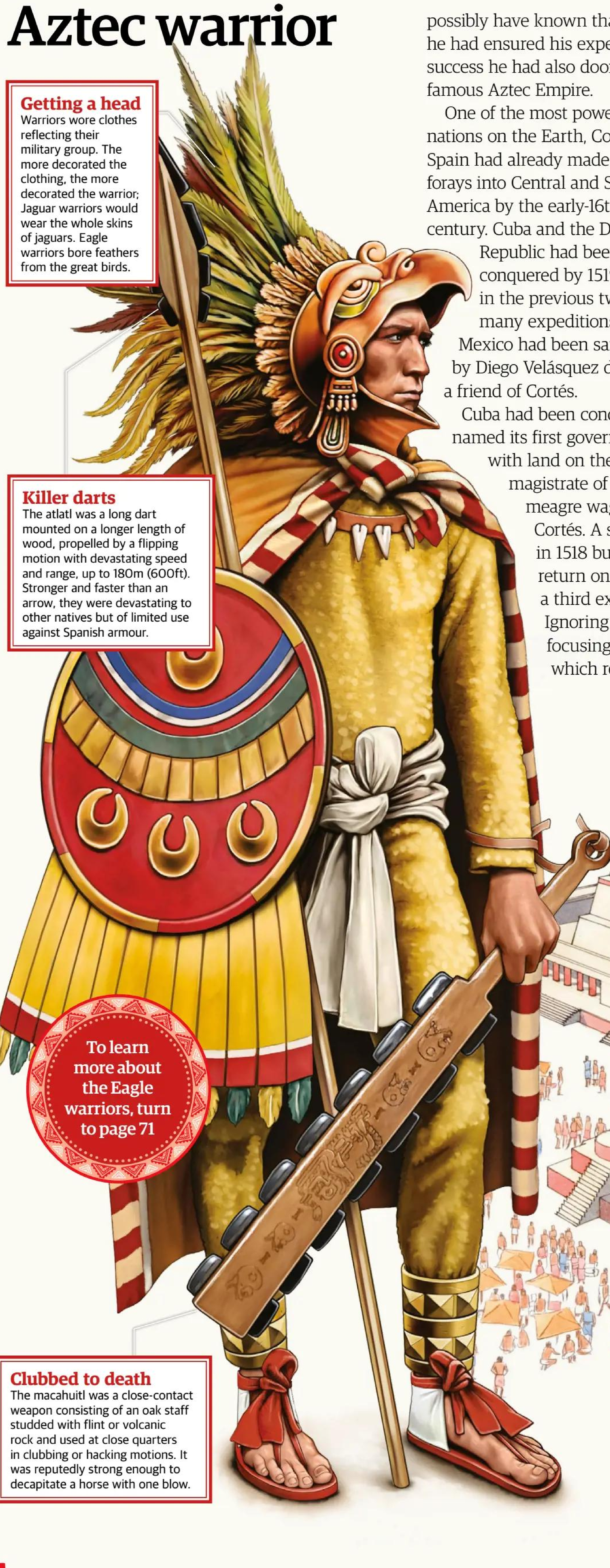
Hernán Cortés was well acquainted with danger: he had faced turbulent and angry seas on journeys, men who wanted to kill him, and probable exile. His daring move to claim ancient Mexico for himself had put him in direct conflict with an erstwhile friend, the governor of Cuba – the nearest Spanish settlement – and he faced a long, arduous and potentially lethal combination of conditions on the road to Tenochtitlán, capital of the mighty Aztec Empire.

Ruled by Moctezuma II, Tenochtitlán was the base of power of the Aztec Empire, stretching from coast to coast and ruling over a vast number of indigenous people. The Aztecs controlled a huge territory and enormous mineral wealth, vital strategic coastlines and countless slaves, using networks of spies loyal to Moctezuma who watched over the various native groups that paid fealty to the Aztec ruler. To conquer the Aztecs, Cortés had to overcome the most feared soldiers on the continent – previous expeditions to South America had returned with grisly and horrifying stories of human sacrifice.

Having set sail from Cuba in February 1519, by April, Cortés' expedition was in big trouble. His men were disgruntled at the prospect of heading inland by hundreds of miles, in apparent contradiction of their original terms of engagement, and openly discussed mutinying. They wished to return to the relative comfort of Cuba from their temporary base at what would become the port of Veracruz. However, their leader had literally and metaphorically mortgaged everything he owned to reach the Yucatán peninsula. Nothing will dissuade him from marching to Tenochtitlán and the wealth, power and destiny he believed was his to claim. To this end, Cortés committed one of the most audacious acts in military history.

Knowing that while his fleet remained in Veracruz there was a chance that his men could rebel and return to Cuba, ending his dreams of conquest and riches, Cortés scuttled his entire fleet – literally sinking his only connection with the Spanish colonies, supplies and reinforcements. The realisation that they were stranded in a hostile and remote land struck fear into the heart of the conquistadors, but Cortés was resolute, telling them to believe in him but allowing the men to make for home in the one returning ship if they desired. None wished to return home, won over by Cortés' eloquence and sheer daring. With the success of this incredible gamble, Cortés couldn't

Aztec warrior



Getting a head
Warriors wore clothes reflecting their military group. The more decorated the clothing, the more decorated the warrior; Jaguar warriors would wear the whole skins of jaguars. Eagle warriors bore feathers from the great birds.

Killer darts
The atlatl was a long dart mounted on a longer length of wood, propelled by a flipping motion with devastating speed and range, up to 180m (600ft). Stronger and faster than an arrow, they were devastating to other natives but of limited use against Spanish armour.

Clubbed to death
The macahuitl was a close-contact weapon consisting of an oak staff studded with flint or volcanic rock and used at close quarters in clubbing or hacking motions. It was reputedly strong enough to decapitate a horse with one blow.

possibly have known that while he had ensured his expedition's success he had also doomed the famous Aztec Empire.

One of the most powerful nations on the Earth, Cortés' Spain had already made several forays into Central and South America by the early-16th century. Cuba and the Dominican Republic had been conquered by 1519 and in the previous two years many expeditions to Mexico had been sanctioned by Diego Velásquez de Cuéllar, a friend of Cortés.

Cuba had been conquered and as Velásquez named its first governor, Cortés was rewarded with land on the island and made a magistrate of Santiago. However, the meagre wages were not enough for Cortés. A second expedition departed in 1518 but when the leader failed to return on time, Velásquez ordered a third expedition to Mexico. Ignoring the ill omens of this and focusing on the first expedition, which returned with gold and slaves, Cortés sensed his chance, mortgaged everything he owned and volunteered to finance the expensive journey himself.

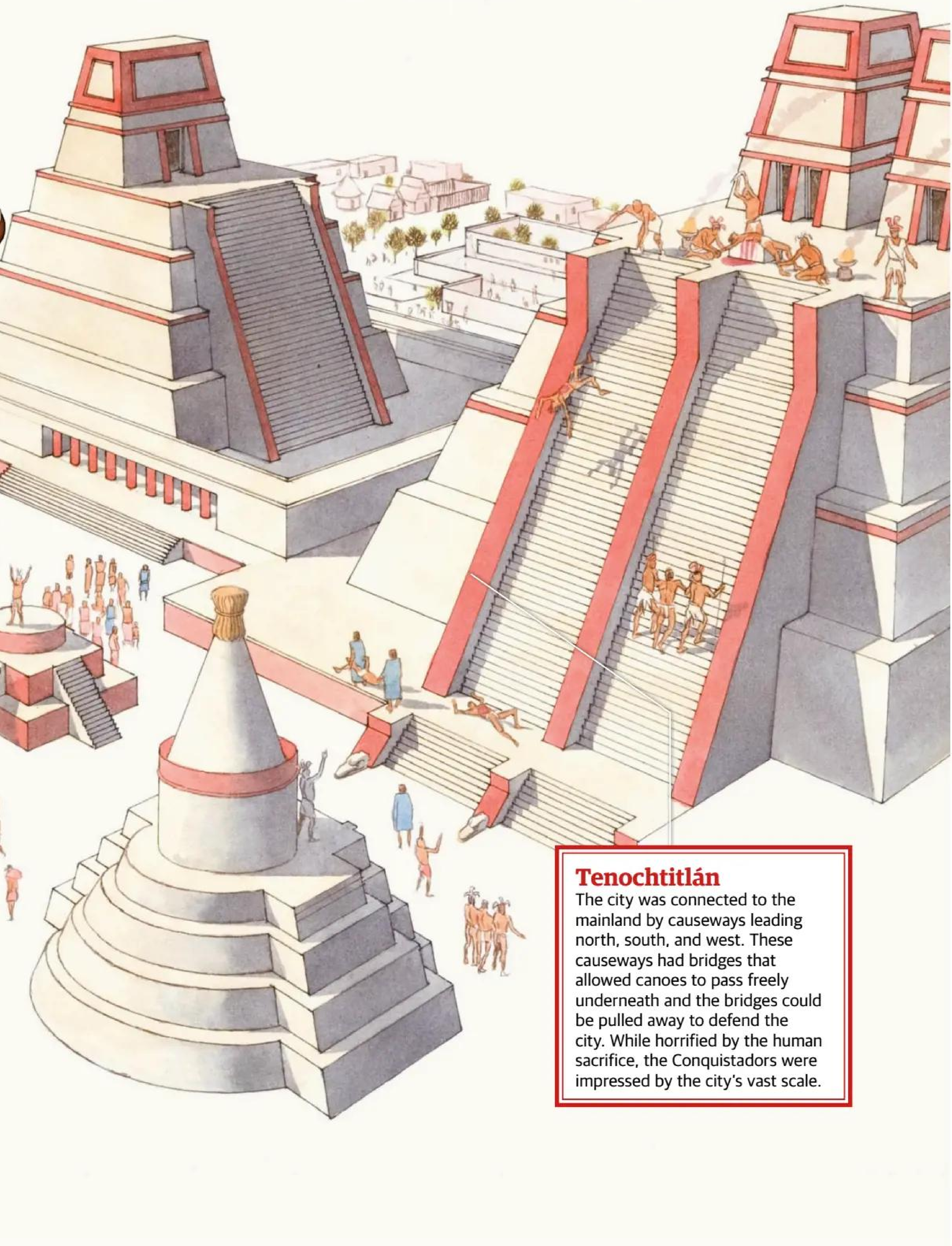
Hungry for success and the wealth and power that triumphing over the Aztec nation with its huge resources would bring, Cortés feverishly prepared for his new endeavour. He initially enjoyed the backing of Velásquez but, as the journey neared, the Cuban ruler came to suspect Cortés of planning to seize the new world in his own name. He was not mistaken in his suspicions. Cortés had no intention of remaining loyal to Velásquez, who sent an official government messenger to let the Spaniard know he was being relieved of his command; Cortés simply had the messenger killed. Velásquez then ordered local officials in Havana to stop the conquistador, yet the men sent to prevent the journey ended up volunteering for the expedition, buying into Cortés' vivid promises of riches and power. The conquistador was a formidable manipulator and diplomat. He was able to rise to the occasion, to adapt and overcome, rely on unknown and untested allies, balance diplomacy with war and respond to savagery with savagery to overcome

MOCTEZUMA II

Aztec, 1466 – 29 June 1520

Brief Bio

Moctezuma, whose name meant, 'he is one who frowns like a lord', was tall and well-proportioned. Descended from royalty, he ruled through fear and was worshipped as a deity by many of the people across the empire. Written records tend to portray Moctezuma as indecisive, weak and naive but historians cast doubt on the accuracy of these reports. In truth, little is known about the Aztec leader, with much of the information about him contradictory.



Tenochtitlán
The city was connected to the mainland by causeways leading north, south, and west. These causeways had bridges that allowed canoes to pass freely underneath and the bridges could be pulled away to defend the city. While horrified by the human sacrifice, the Conquistadors were impressed by the city's vast scale.

To learn more about the Eagle warriors, turn to page 71

Velásquez, the most powerful man in South America.

On 18 February 1519, without official authorisation, Cortés set sail from Cuba with 11 ships and over 500 men. He sailed west, disturbing the peace of the beautiful tropical island of Cozumel, on the Yucatán coast. Cortés was the best-armed European to hit the continent, with cutting-edge weaponry, including cannons that some sources believe represented the first use of gunpowder in the New World. Against the flints, spears and arrows of the South American tribes they represented devastatingly superior armaments. Along with muskets and crossbows effective up to 90 metres (300 feet), Cortés' men, although vastly outnumbered, had the advantage.

Cortés first met with a group of Maya, the tribe that had dominated the Yucatán 1,000 years prior. The Mayans had previously taken a Spaniard named Alonso de Aguilar captive – as a result Cortés was able to communicate with the Mayans, an incredible stroke of luck. The small fleet sailed around the Yucatán coast to Potonchan, arriving there in mid-March 1519. The natives there had previously given gold to a Spanish expedition and Cortés hoped for a similar reception. However, upon arrival, he was not welcomed with gold, but warriors. Finding that diplomacy was of little use, Cortés deployed another devastating shock-and-awe weapon: war dogs trained to kill and conquistadors mounted on horses.

HERNÁN CORTÉS DE MONROY Y PIZARRO

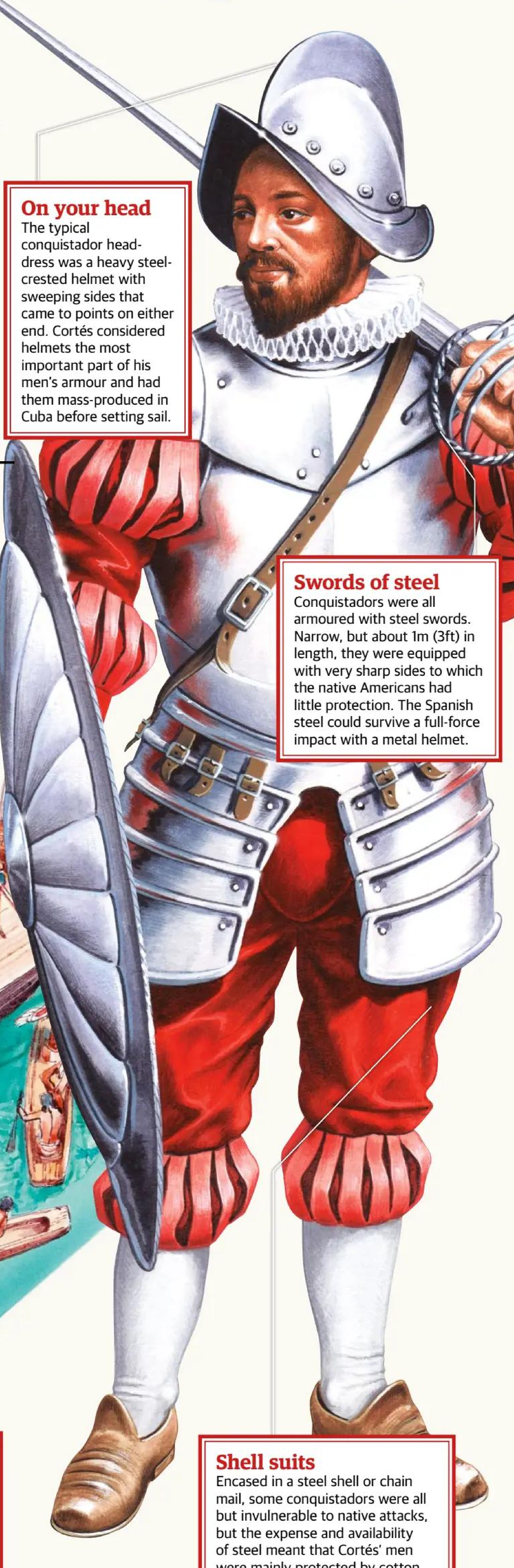
Spanish, 1485 – 1547

Brief Bio

Cortés was born into a poor family but schooled in the ways of war from an early age. He landed in the Dominican Republic aged 19 and by 25 had befriended Diego Velásquez. Cortés joined him in his conquest of Cuba and saw that leading an expedition to the new world was the path to untold riches and power. He sacked the Aztec capital city and through war and disease brought about the fall of the great civilisation.

> "The Aztecs had never seen beasts trained to attack men before and this radically different form of warfare struck fear into the native fighting groups"

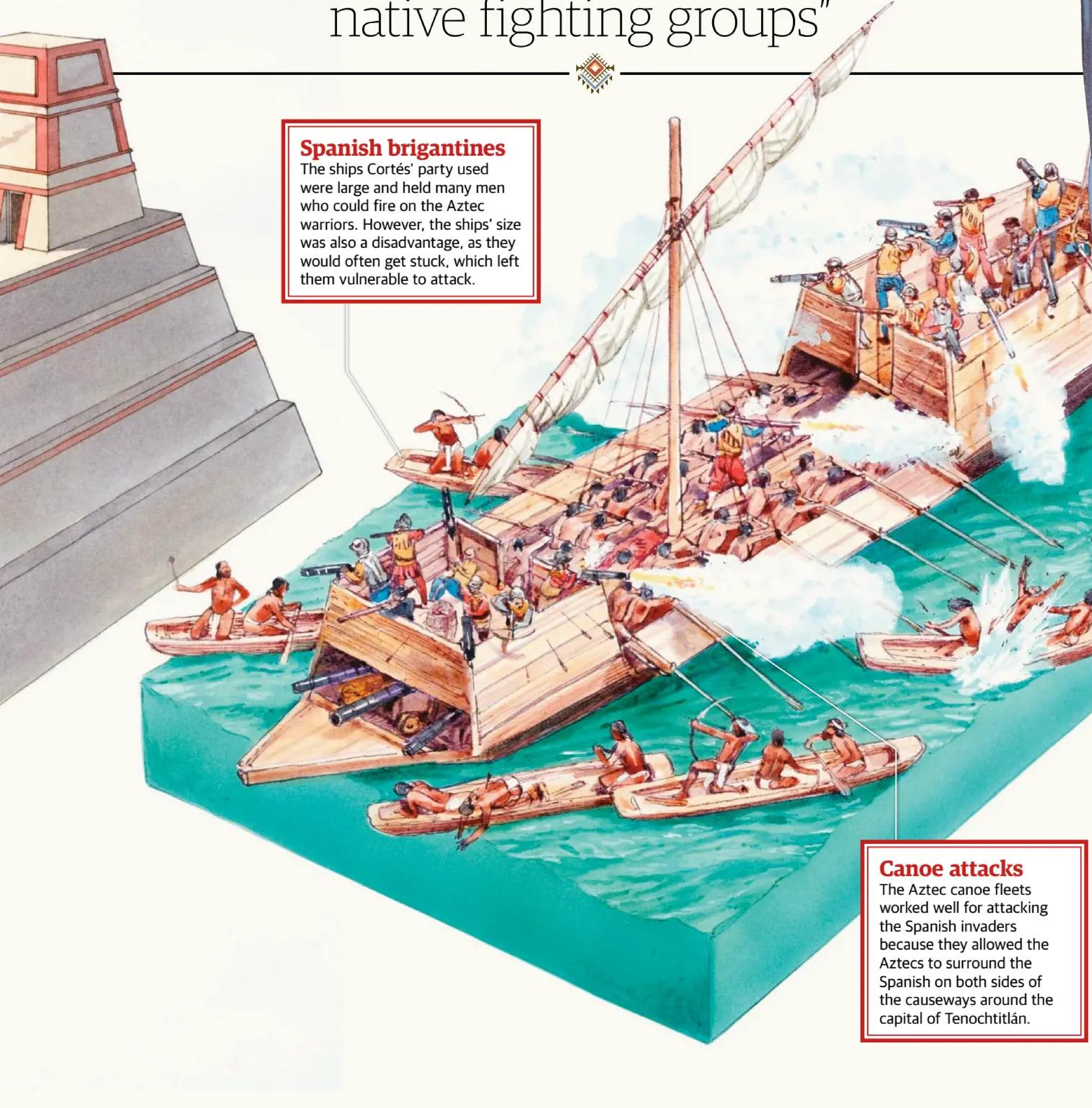
Spanish Conquistador



On your head
The typical conquistador head-dress was a heavy steel-crested helmet with sweeping sides that came to points on either end. Cortés considered helmets the most important part of his men's armour and had them mass-produced in Cuba before setting sail.

Swords of steel
Conquistadors were all armoured with steel swords. Narrow, but about 1m (3ft) in length, they were equipped with very sharp sides to which the native Americans had little protection. The Spanish steel could survive a full-force impact with a metal helmet.

Shell suits
Encased in a steel shell or chain mail, some conquistadors were all but invulnerable to native attacks, but the expense and availability of steel meant that Cortés' men were mainly protected by cotton or leather jackets, which were effective against Aztec weaponry.



Spanish brigantines
The ships Cortés' party used were large and held many men who could fire on the Aztec warriors. However, the ships' size was also a disadvantage, as they would often get stuck, which left them vulnerable to attack.

Canoe attacks
The Aztec canoe fleets worked well for attacking the Spanish invaders because they allowed the Aztecs to surround the Spanish on both sides of the causeways around the capital of Tenochtitlán.

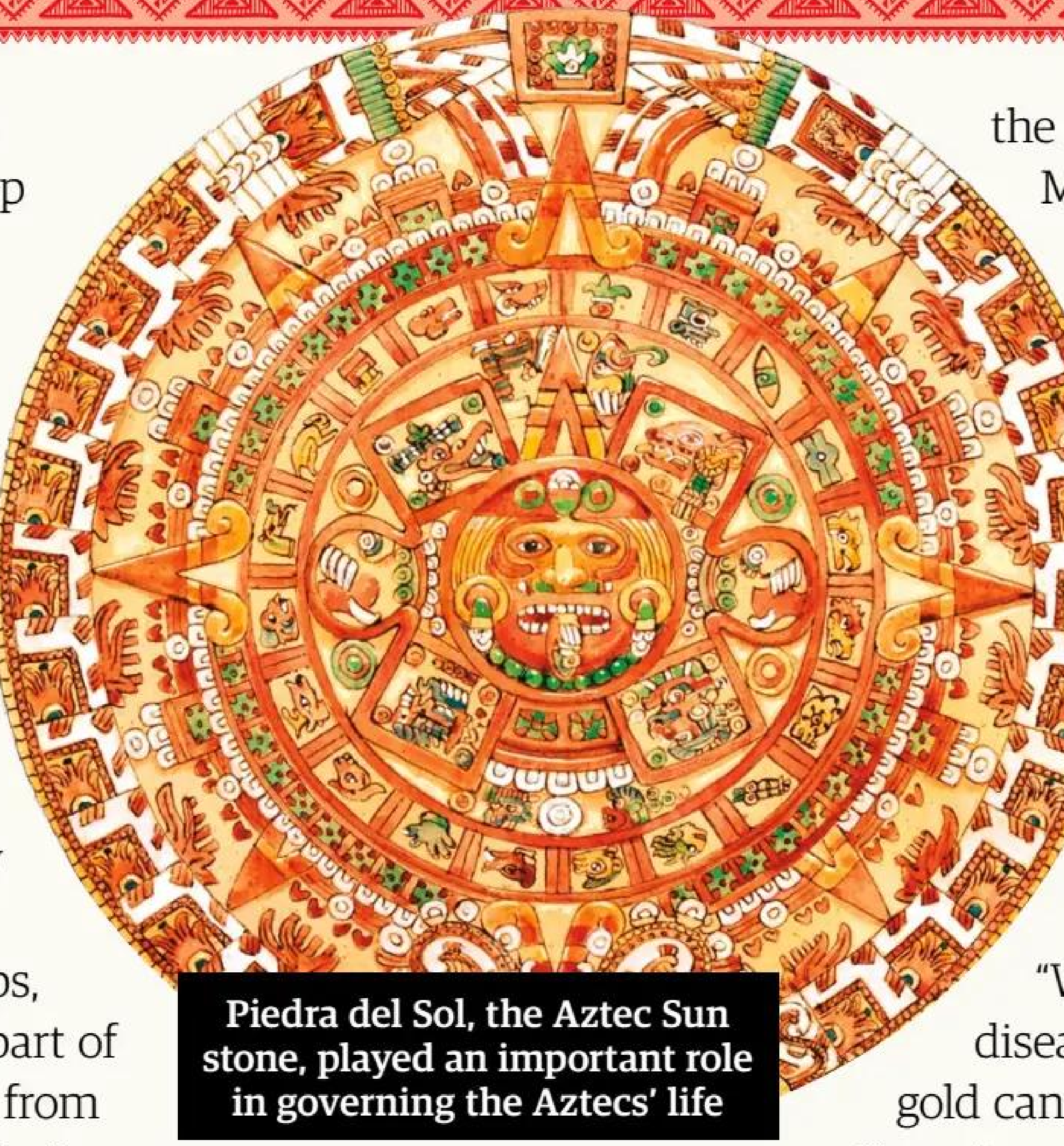
The Aztecs had never seen beasts trained to attack men before and this radically different form of warfare struck fear and chaos into the native fighting groups. Powerless to take on Cortés' men and disturbed by the presence of the animals - some of which they had never seen before - on the battlefields, the warriors were physically and psychologically broken.

In defeat and supplication, the natives brought food, gold and 20 women for the Spaniards, including a woman known as La Malinche. Crucially, she knew the languages spoken by both Mayan and Aztec peoples, meaning Cortés was able to communicate to the Aztecs - with Malinche converting Aztec into Mayan, and Aguilar translating from Mayan to Spanish. This was bad news for the Aztecs, and it's argued Malinche betrayed her own people. But for Cortés, this luck meant he had another link in the chain of making good on his desire to rule over South America.

Moving on across the Gulf of Mexico, the group encountered native people disgruntled at having to pay taxes to Moctezuma and at giving up their people to make up the human sacrifices the Aztec gods demanded. Cortés was able to take advantage of the misery and disgruntlement of the various ethnic groups, nine in total, that were part of the Aztec Empire, ruled from the unique island capital of Tenochtitlán.

The capital was built in the middle of a lake and grid-lined with canals; simply put, it was one of the most awe-inspiring cities the world had ever seen. Over the previous 100 years, its population had grown to 250,000 and the small island swelled as the Aztecs reclaimed land from the lake. It was larger than any city in Europe at the time of Cortés' arrival and twice the population of London.

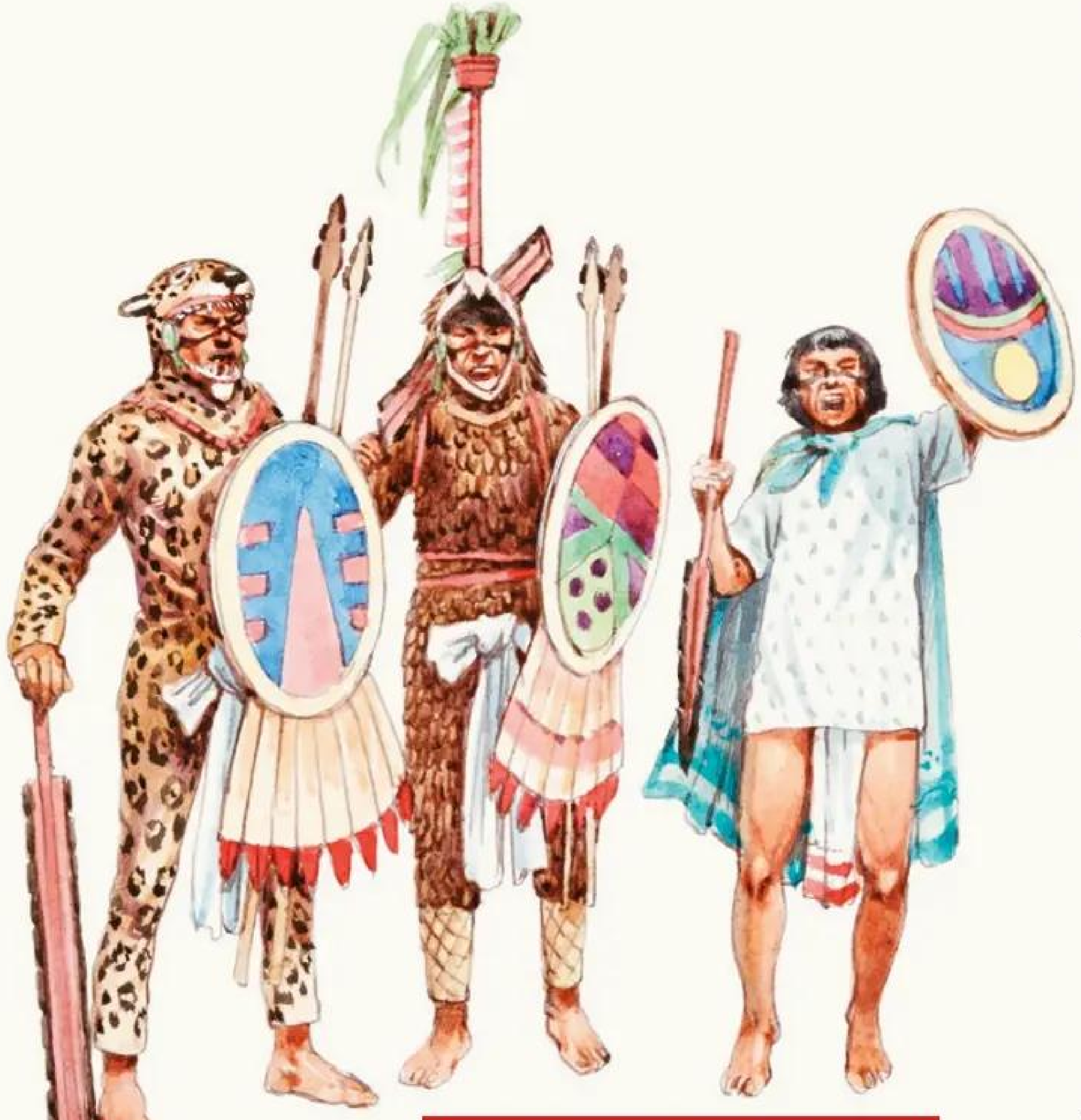
The Aztecs had ruled from Tenochtitlán for hundreds of years, subjugating nearby tribes and ruling over 10 million people, maintaining an iron grip over a great expanse of land. As a result, the Aztec ruler (or tlatoani), Moctezuma, had known of Cortés' approach long before the Spaniards approached Tenochtitlán. Instead of sending warriors, they responded by sending an emissary to greet him, laden with gifts of gold that weren't treasured by the Aztecs, but seemed irresistible to the Spanish. As Cortés said of the precious metal: "We Spaniards suffer from a disease of the heart, which only gold can cure".

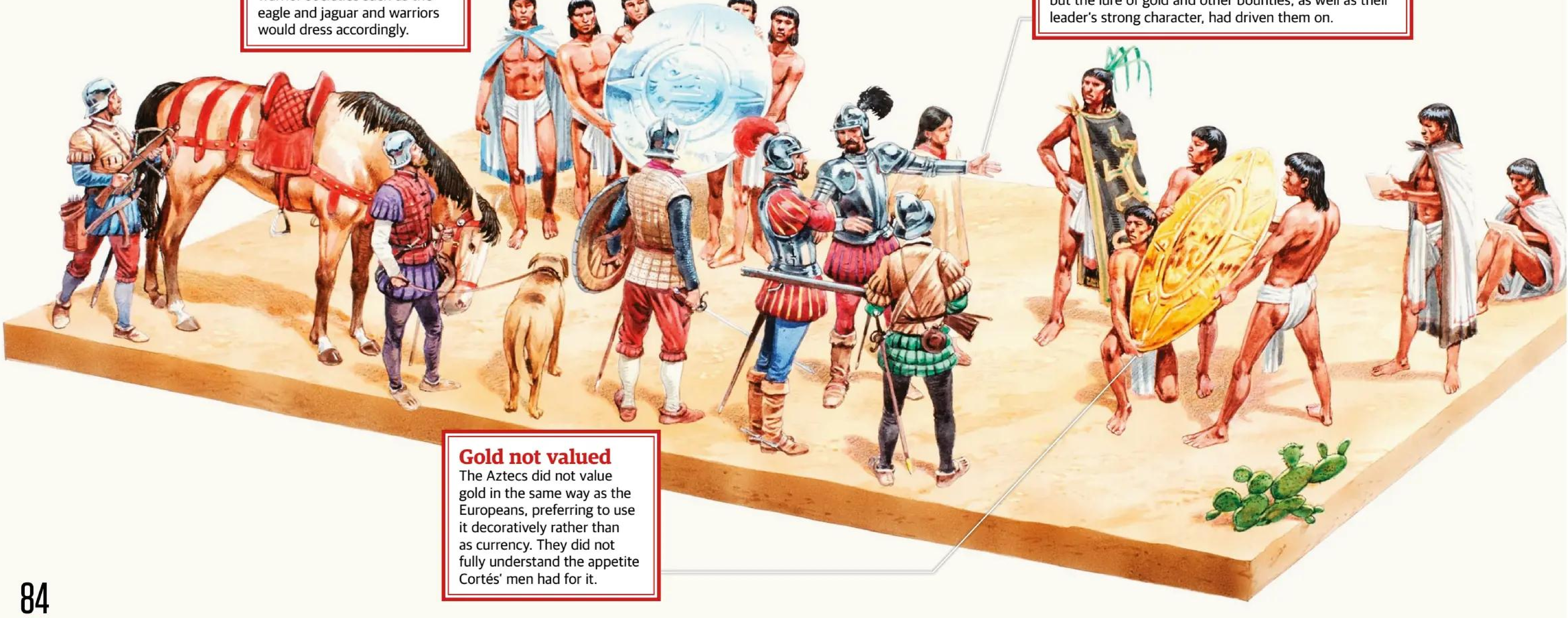

Piedra del Sol, the Aztec Sun stone, played an important role in governing the Aztecs' life

Knowing of the Spaniards' lust for gold and precious stones, Moctezuma offered these gifts on the condition that Cortés stopped his march on Tenochtitlán. There was no chance of this, though, and the gifts merely whetted his appetite for treasure. Cortés signalled that he intended to reach the capital to pay tribute to Moctezuma. In reality, his intentions were less benign, but Moctezuma wasn't so naive that he wouldn't have an idea of what the true intent of the conquistador was.

Moctezuma knew he had a problem and feared the approach of the conquistadors: Cortés had arrived at a time in the Aztec calendar that did not allow for battle, nor for the training of his

> "Cortés said of the precious metal: We Spaniards suffer from a disease of the heart, which only gold can cure"


Noble warriors
The noble warrior class made up the special military elite units. These were formed from warrior societies such as the eagle and jaguar and warriors would dress accordingly.


Plunder
Many of Cortés' men had doubts about the expedition but the lure of gold and other bounties, as well as their leader's strong character, had driven them on.

Gold not valued
The Aztecs did not value gold in the same way as the Europeans, preferring to use it decoratively rather than as currency. They did not fully understand the appetite Cortés' men had for it.

Siege of Tenochtitlán

The key events in the bloody siege of the great Aztec capital

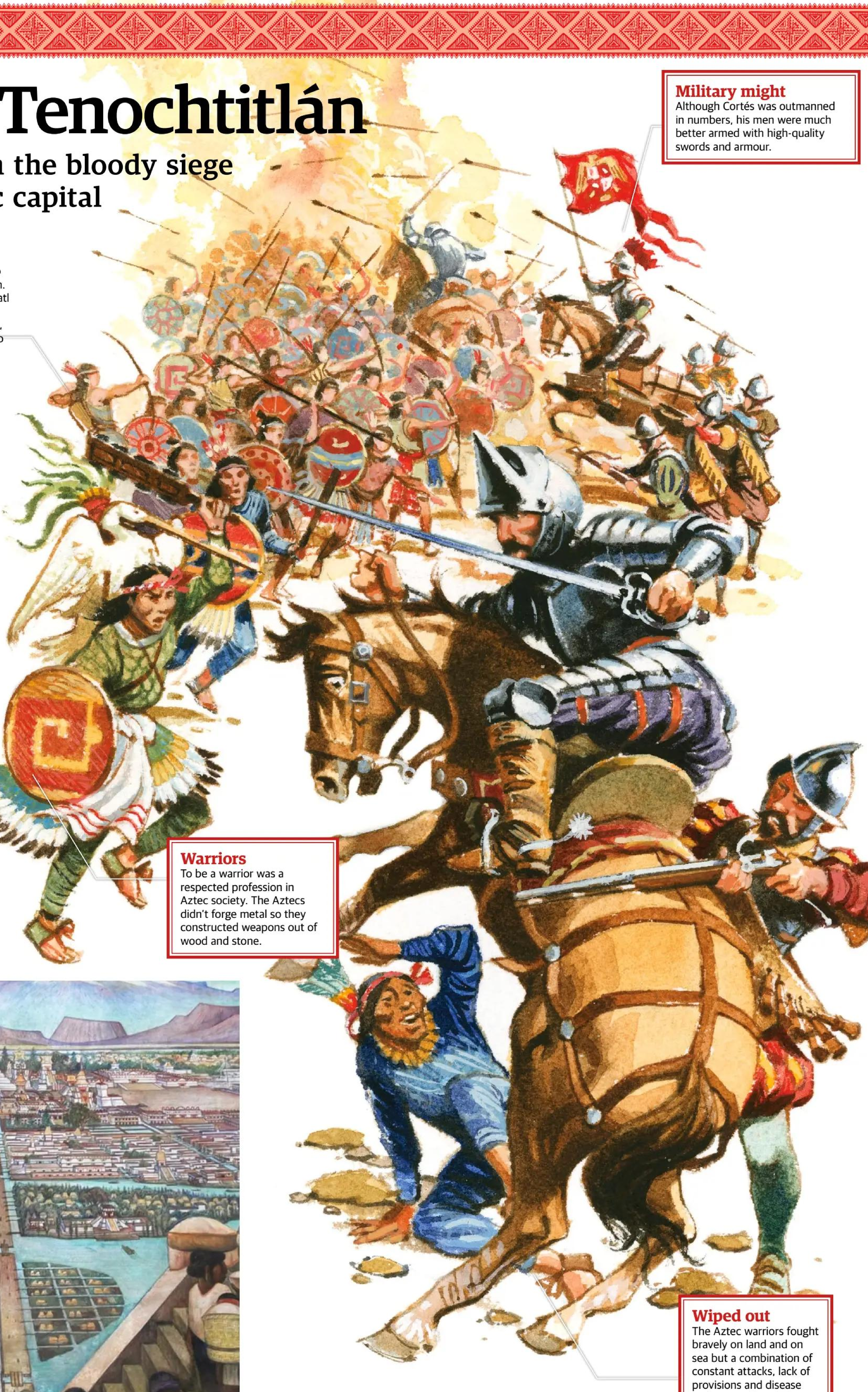
The Aztecs revolt
With Cortés heading off an invasion force, Pedro de Alvarado was left in command in Tenochtitlán. Relations deteriorated when the festival of Toxcatl was misinterpreted as hostility and Alvarado initiated the killing of thousands of Aztec nobles, warriors, priests and civilians before retreating to the Palace of Axayacatl.

La Noche Triste
The events sparked an all-out assault by the Aztecs on the Spaniards and, following Moctezuma's death, the Spanish position in Tenochtitlán was dangerously compromised. Hopelessly outnumbered, the Spanish and their allies had to flee the capital. Cortés reportedly wept during the aftermath of the Aztec massacre.

Waterways and canals
There were just three land routes to the island city of Tenochtitlán and these routes in and out of the city would become the battleground during the siege. Ambushed in the canals, the Spanish were slaughtered, drowned or captured. Alvarado escaped by using his spear to pole vault over a canal but only a third of Cortés' men escaped.

Escape to Tlaxcala
Cortés and his allies returned to Tlaxcala to regroup, but not before they encountered a Aztec army intent on destroying the remainder of their force in the Otumba Valley (Otompan). Despite losses, Cortés escaped and rebuilt a coalition. Cortés planned to trap and besiege the Aztecs within their capital.

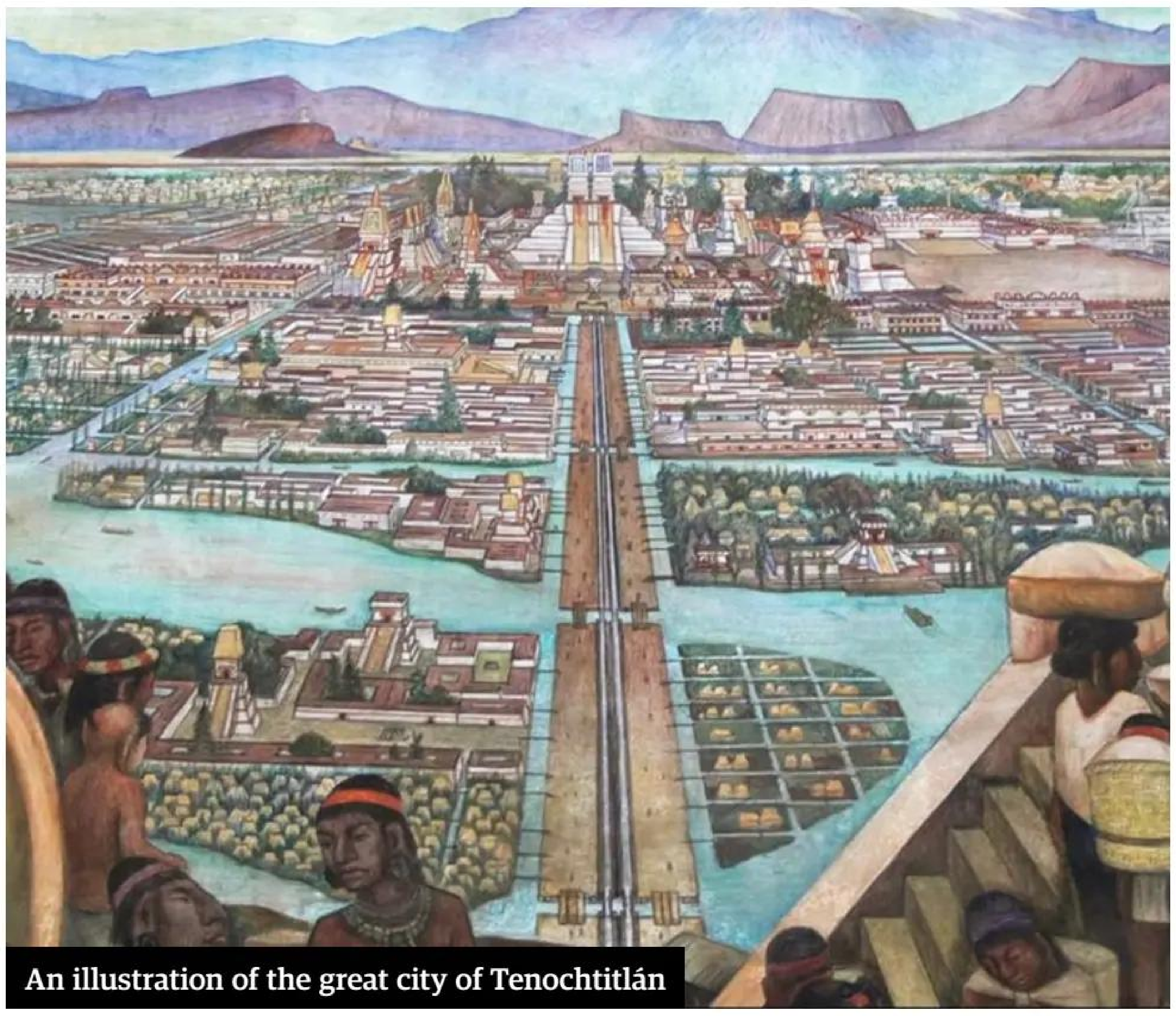
Tenochtitlán under siege
Cortés built small warships and relationships with neighbours of Tenochtitlán. He used the ships to counter Aztec canoes and gained ground on the causeways to the capital, which had been hit by the dual blow of loss of supplies and a devastating outbreak of smallpox. Despite fierce fighting, Tenochtitlán was routed and a huge number of inhabitants killed. Cortés built what is now Mexico City.



Military might
Although Cortés was outmanned in numbers, his men were much better armed with high-quality swords and armour.

Warriors
To be a warrior was a respected profession in Aztec society. The Aztecs didn't forge metal so they constructed weapons out of wood and stone.

Wiped out
The Aztec warriors fought bravely on land and on sea but a combination of constant attacks, lack of provisions and disease such as smallpox led to their demise.



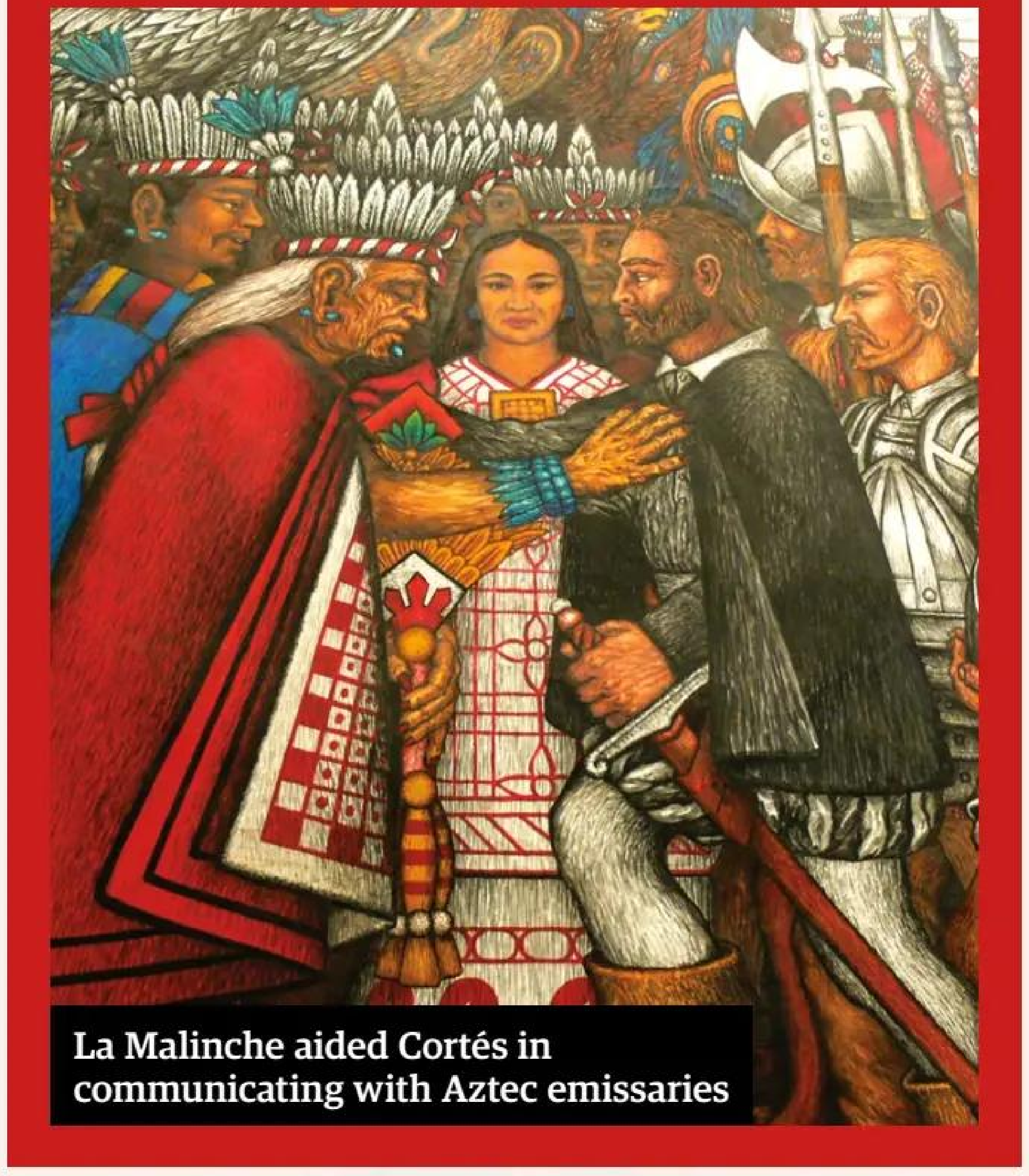
An illustration of the great city of Tenochtitlán

Wife and translator

Without his translator and wife-to-be, Cortés could probably not have triumphed in Mexico. La Malinche offered a vital connection between his language and that of the Aztecs.

La Malinche was one of 20 slaves offered to the conquistadors and served as translator and mediator; it is likely she had previously received formal education, explaining her abilities to speak a number of South American dialects.

She became Cortés's concubine and gave birth to a son, Martín, with Cortés, one of the first people born of mixed Spanish and South American genetic make-up, and died aged around 25. Some see her as a traitor who facilitated the subjugation of her own people but others as an intelligent strategist who made the best of her situation.



La Malinche aided Cortés in communicating with Aztec emissaries

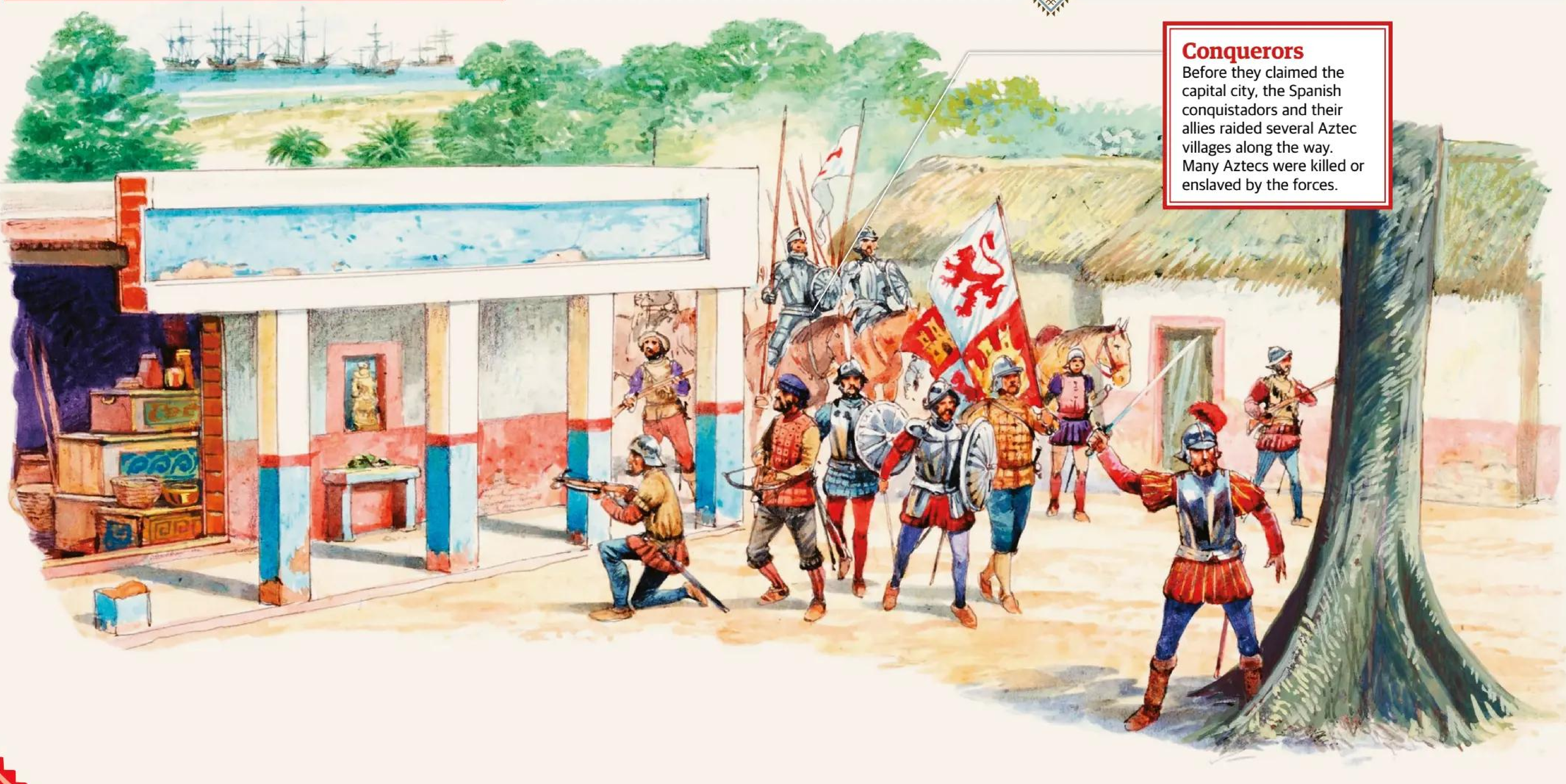
warriors - Aztec society was strictly governed by calendars. To make matters worse, as a profoundly spiritual and superstitious people, the Aztecs had been struck by a series of portents that boded ill for the empire: a comet sighted in the sky during the day, fires in two temples in the capital and the violent eruption of the volcano Popocatépetl. The dragon-like South American god Quetzalcoatl - the feathered serpent - was prophesied to return from the east in 1519 to rule over the land around this time - he was also bearded and white-skinned. The parallels with Cortés were hard to ignore.

Whether Moctezuma genuinely believed that Cortés was the living embodiment of Quetzalcoatl is hard to discern. Spanish accounts of Cortés' expedition paint the Aztecs as gullible and deferential, but many modern historians believe this to be a classic case of the victors writing the history books, or a complete misapprehension of Moctezuma's initial politeness toward Cortés, as Aztecs used politeness to assert dominance. Regardless, the time and nature of Cortés' arrival was another stroke of luck. By August 1519, Cortés and his men were a mere 320 kilometres (200 miles) from Tenochtitlán, with the Aztec ruling elite ambivalent as to what to do next. Some favoured a violent confrontation but Moctezuma - rattled by what he saw as ominous portents and realising that his gifts would not persuade Cortés to abandon his march on the capital - allowed Cortés to approach further.

Having secured his Spanish force's allegiance by destroying his own fleet, Cortés ensured that he grew his army from the 500 he started out with by convincing the native people to rise up against the Aztecs, who taxed them and would take their people as sacrificial victims. Cortés had allied with some of the best fighters in Mexico and long-standing enemies of the Aztecs, the Tlaxcalans, even converting some to Christianity,

The Aztec mask of Quetzalcoatl

> "The Aztec god Quetzalcoatl was prophesied to return from the east in 1519 to rule over the land around this time - he was also bearded and white-skinned. The parallels with Cortés were hard to ignore"



Conquerors
Before they claimed the capital city, the Spanish conquistadors and their allies raided several Aztec villages along the way. Many Aztecs were killed or enslaved by the forces.

by demonstrating his military might but also by respecting the Tlaxcala traditions.

Together, the Spaniards and their native allies sealed their allegiance with the massacre of hundreds of natives at Cholula in October 1520, who were firmly under Aztec rule at the time, following a supposed assassination plot against Cortés. The killings numbered anywhere between 3,000 and 30,000 and sent a chilling message to Moctezuma – resist us and die. By November 1519, Cortés had 50,000 American allies and had arrived in Tenochtitlán, bringing an army of the Aztec Empire's enemies right to its front door.

For their part, the conquistadors were dumbstruck when they saw the size, intricacy and genius of Tenochtitlán, a city essentially built in the middle of a giant lake and probably the largest and most sophisticated city on Earth at the time. This was the prize Cortés had risked everything for and spent nine months plotting, fighting, marching and killing for. Whether suing for peace or truly believing him to be the incarnation of a god, Moctezuma initially welcomed Cortés to Tenochtitlán, inviting the Spaniards to the city and into his palace, where they were lavished with precious metals, allegedly saying to Cortés' men: "You have come to your city: Mexico, here you have come to sit on your place, on your throne. Oh, it has been reserved to you for a small time, it was conserved by those who have gone, your substitutes… Come to the land, come and rest: take possession of your royal houses, give food to your body."

Statue of Aztec god of rain Tlaloc, a major deity in their culture

The Aztec tlatoani greeted Cortés as the reincarnation of Quetzalcoatl and the two men apparently paid tribute to one another – Moctezuma, according to the Spaniards, pledging his loyalty to Cortés – though the Spaniards were horrified at seeing the extent and nature of the Aztec's predilection for human sacrifice. In response, Cortés had Moctezuma clapped in irons; the tlatoani subsequently held hostage in his own palace by the conquistadors as they raided the city's riches. The devoutly Catholic Spanish also destroyed the Aztec idols, put a stop to human sacrifices but the natives did not rebel.

Despite their unexpected pliability, Cortés faced problems from an unexpected place, just as he had Tenochtitlán in his grasp. An arresting party arrived on the coast from Cuba

Human sacrifices

How common was human sacrifice?

The Aztecs dominated most of the surrounding city states at its height, with around 10 million subjects. Making constant human sacrifices meant the numbers of sacrificed people were huge and probably the greatest number in human history.

Who performed it?

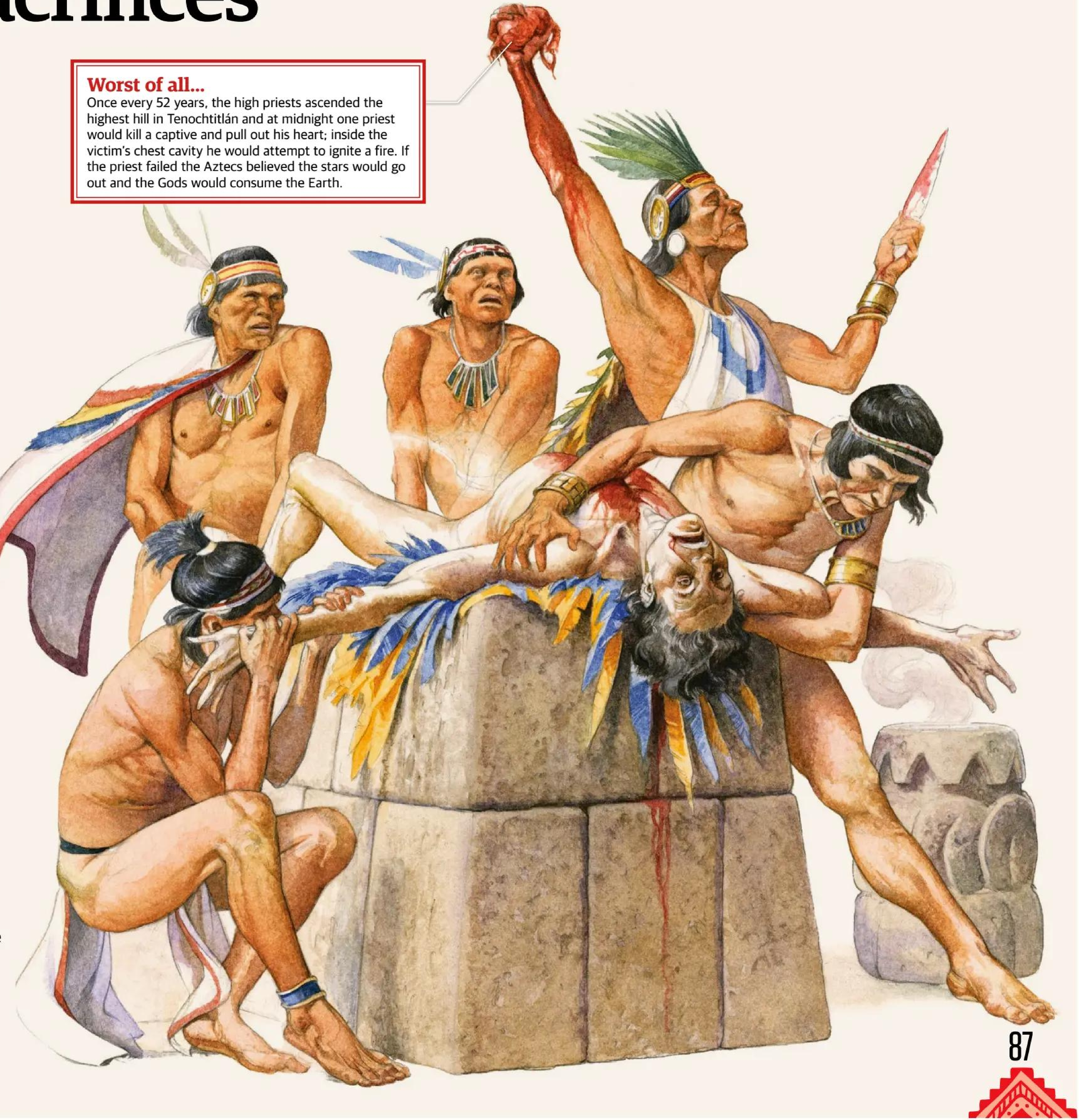
The Aztecs had large numbers of priests who would carry out the sacrifices, usually one male and one female priest would officiate. As a result, they would develop good anatomical skills in removing the skin and organs of sacrificial victims.

Why was it done?

The Aztecs subjugated other native people and demanded tributes in the form of human sacrificial victims, required to placate and please the Aztec gods. Sacrificial victims frequently went to their deaths willingly, promised great riches in the next life. For their part, the Aztecs did not carry out these sacrifices out of bloodlust, but because they believed they were necessary for continued prosperity.

How was it done?

Cortés was horrified by what he saw at Tenochtitlán – the scale and brutality of the human sacrifices disgusting even the violent conquistadors. Aztec warriors attempted to capture their enemies alive, in order to sacrifice them to the Aztec gods. A number of horrific methods were documented at the time: hearts were often removed and shown to the Sun; victims were flayed alive and their skin worn by priests and tributes were often boiled in huge vats, the priest and other nobility believed it was important to ingest the essence of fallen enemies.



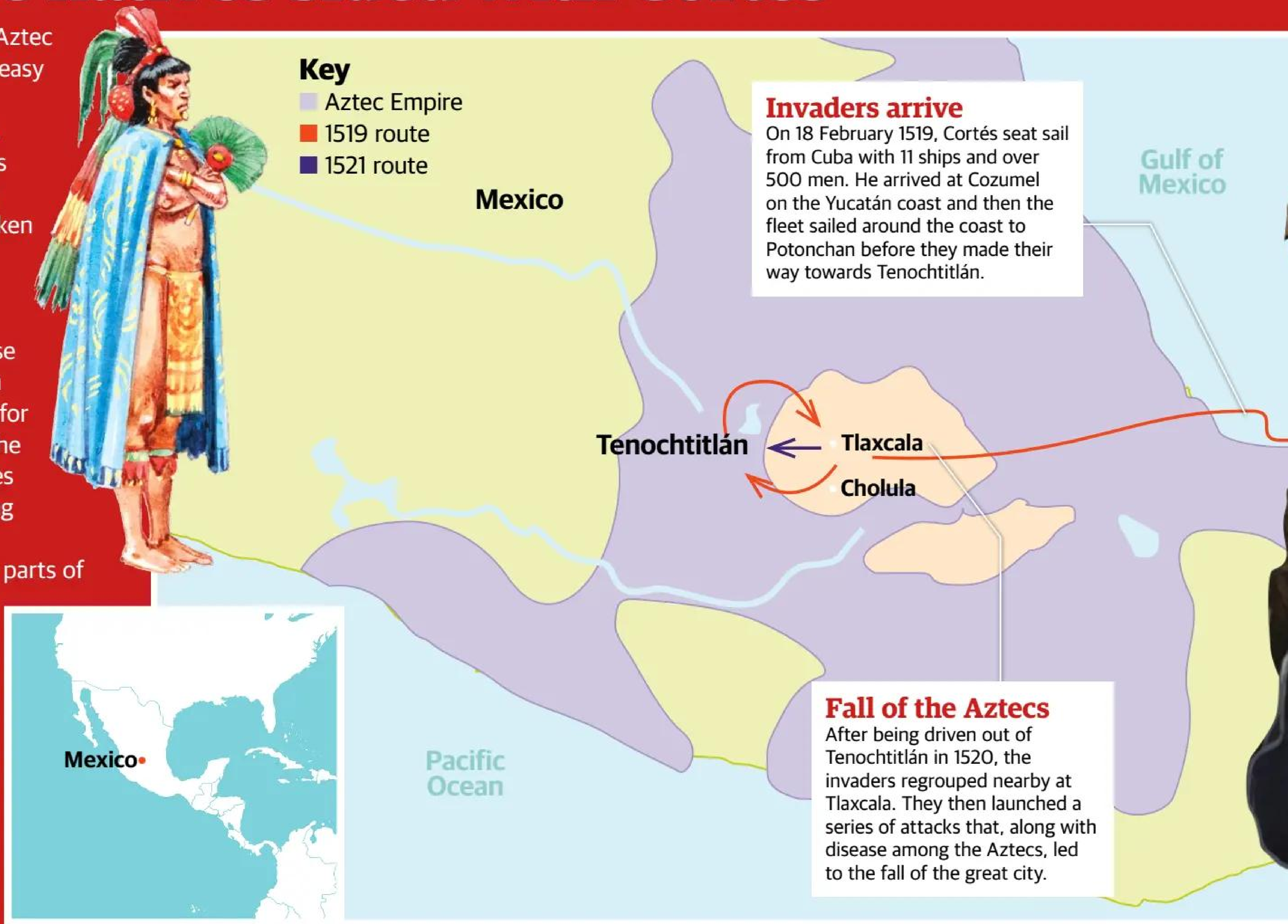
Worst of all…

Once every 52 years, the high priests ascended the highest hill in Tenochtitlán and at midnight one priest would kill a captive and pull out his heart; inside the victim's chest cavity he would attempt to ignite a fire. If the priest failed the Aztecs believed the stars would go out and the Gods would consume the Earth.

Why some natives sided with Cortés

Despite the breadth of the Aztec Empire, there existed an uneasy state of low-level attrition warfare throughout Mexico. These so-called Flower Wars were low-level but ongoing skirmishes designed to weaken opponents by making them commit ever-higher percentages of human resources to battles. Because Aztec religion was based on sourcing sufficient captives for human sacrifices, it suited the Aztecs to keep their enemies alive rather than slaughtering them on the battlefield.

This led to hatred on the parts of other tribes – most notably the Tlaxcala, the Aztecs' blood enemies. Cortés played on the resentment and envy of other native tribes to turn them against Moctezuma, but had another tactic available to him – the brutal slaughter of any native who disobeyed his wishes.



Invaders arrive

On 18 February 1519, Cortés seat sail from Cuba with 11 ships and over 500 men. He arrived at Cozumel on the Yucatán coast and then the fleet sailed around the coast to Potonchan before they made their way towards Tenochtitlán.

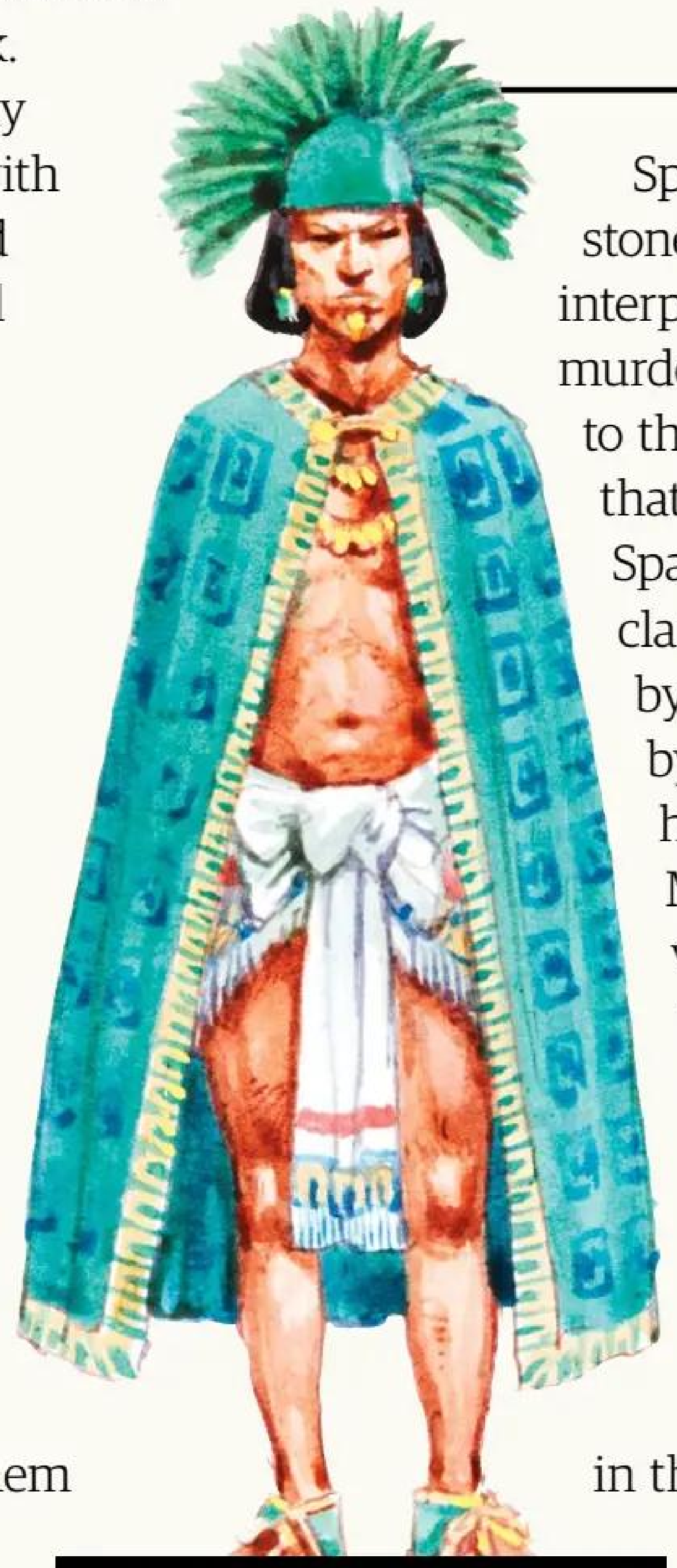
Fall of the Aztecs

After being driven out of Tenochtitlán in 1520, the invaders regrouped nearby at Tlaxcala. They then launched a series of attacks that, along with disease among the Aztecs, led to the fall of the great city.

with orders to kill or capture him, so in May 1520, Cortés headed east to meet the party from Cuba, leaving 140 Spaniards and some Tlaxcalans under the command of a deputy, Pedro de Alvarado, to hold Tenochtitlán. Cortés set out against Pánfilo de Narváez with fewer troops than his rival but launched a surprise night attack. After his victory, he convinced many of the defeated soldiers to join up with him, using the vast amounts of gold and promises of more as a powerful bargaining tool.

Arriving back at Tenochtitlán, Cortés found a scene of utter chaos. Supposedly mistaking Aztec preparations for a spiritual festival for something more sinister – and mindful of the hundreds of thousands of Aztecs surrounding them – Alvarado and the remaining conquistadors had massacred the priesthood and nobility in Tenochtitlán. Cortés was forced to fight his way back into the city but, by July 1520, he and his men were surrounded in the palace. Sensing the mood of the crowd, Cortés had Moctezuma brought out to placate his people, only for them to reject their tlatoani as a traitor. What happened next has remained a source of debate for centuries.

> "The Spaniards were driven from the capital by the furious Aztecs, Cortés barely escaping with his life"

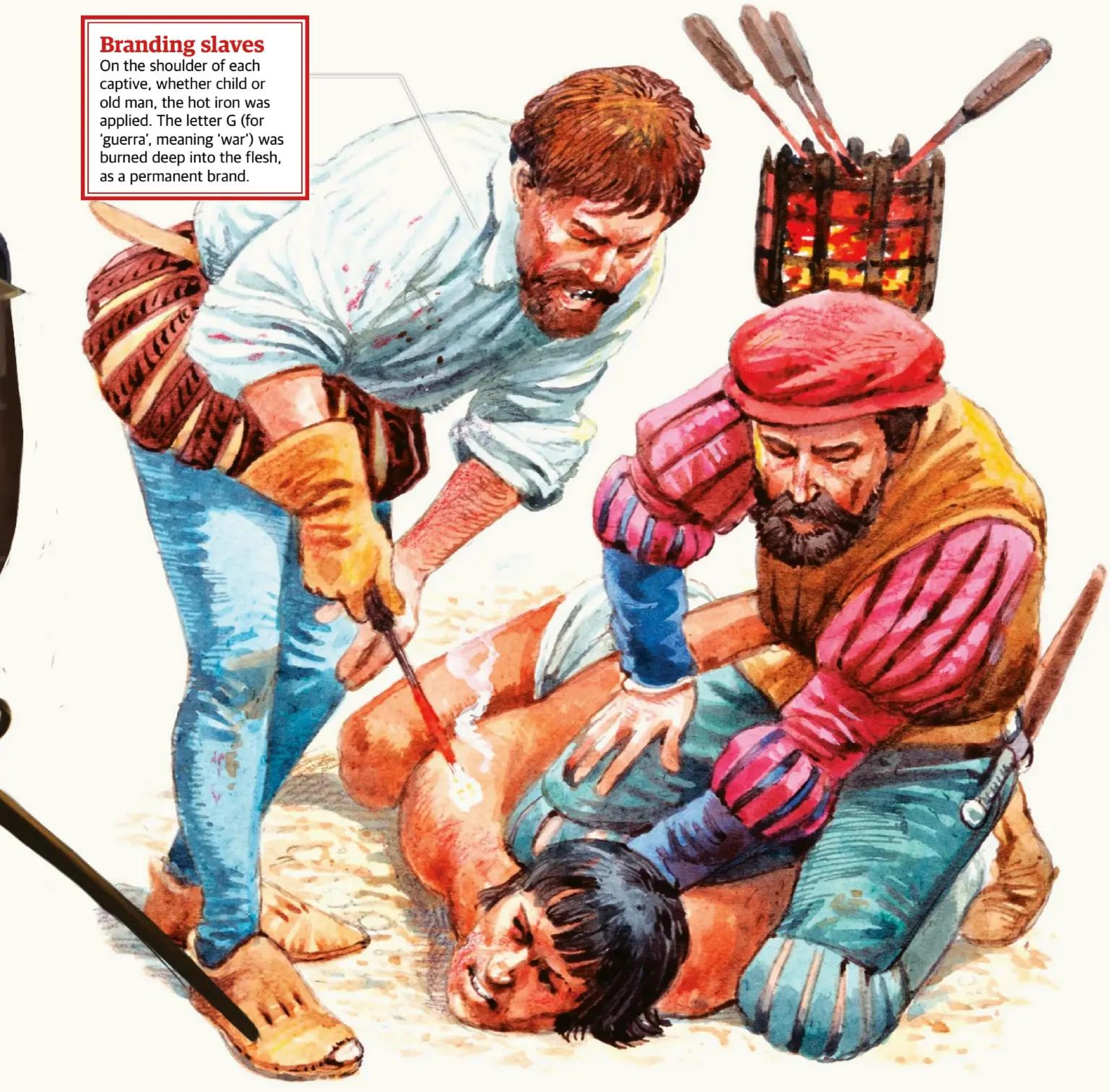


The Aztecs were a very advanced civilisation

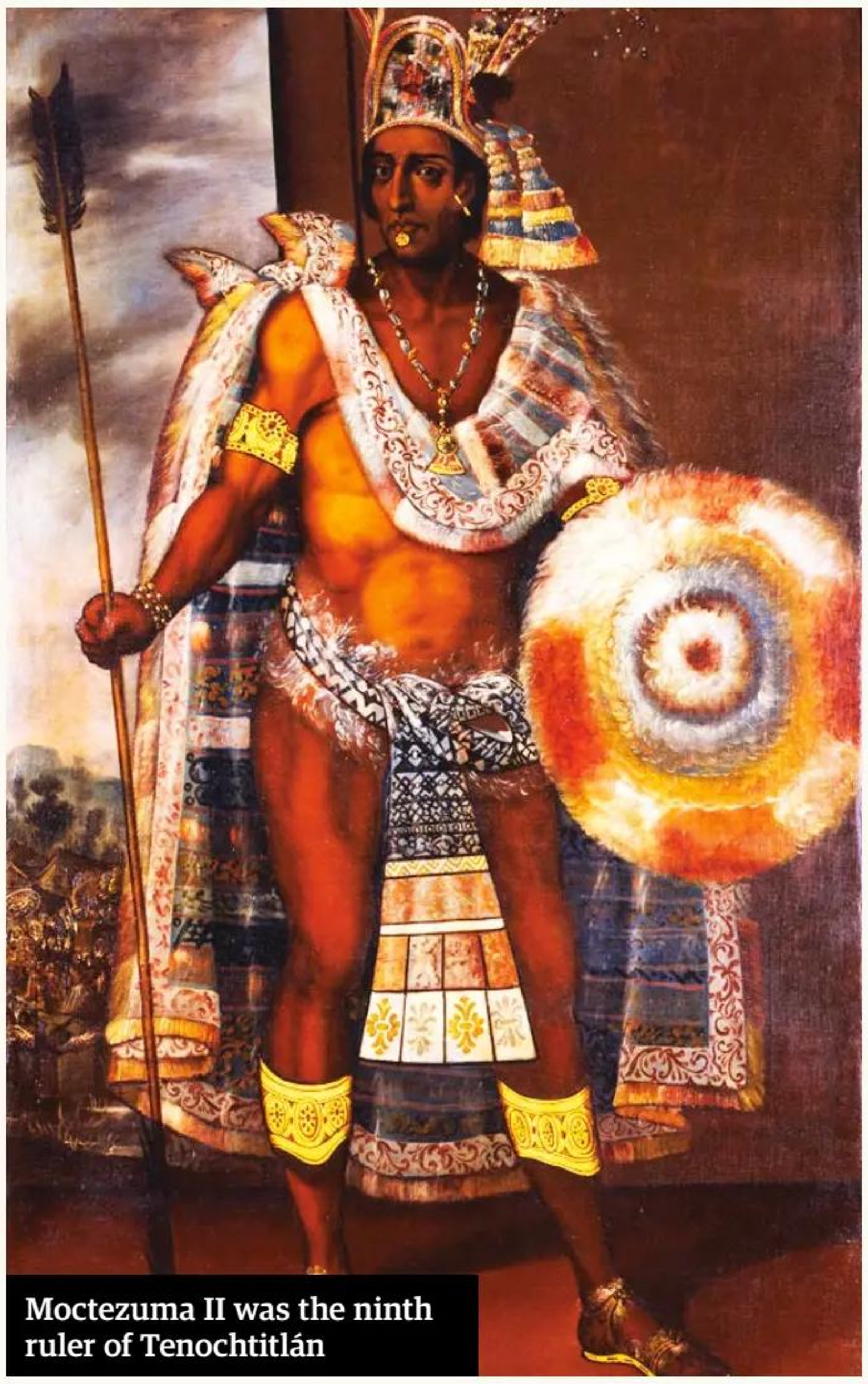
Spanish records suggest that the Aztecs stoned Moctezuma to death; more recent interpretations suggest that Moctezuma was murdered when he was no longer of use to the Spaniards. Some reports indicate that Moctezuma was mourned by the Spanish conquistadors, while another claims that Cortés killed the Aztec ruler by stabbing him in the back, or even by brutally pouring molten gold down his throat. What is known is that Moctezuma's death coincided with a violent uprising within Tenochtitlán. The Spaniards were driven from the capital by the furious Aztecs, Cortés barely escaping with his life. In their desperation to flee their attackers, many conquistadors jumped into canals, where they drowned, weighted down by the weight of looted gold in their clothes or pulled down by Aztec warriors. The Aztecs had vanquished the conquistadors and banished them from the city. The affair was later referred to by the Spaniards as 'La Noche Triste' – 'The Sad Night.'

Although they fled the city, the conquistadors left behind something much deadlier than their cannons, fighting dogs or allied natives. In 1520, an epidemic of smallpox struck Tenochtitlán with ferocity, leaving large numbers of its population dead and those remaining too weak or hungry to fend for themselves. By the time Cortés and the conquistadors returned to Tenochtitlán with furious vengeance, razing the city to the ground to the point that the location of the iconic Great Temple was lost for centuries, the Aztec Empire was crumbling to the ground, there to remain for several centuries until excavations in Mexico City started to reveal fragments of the once-great civilisation. Over only the first decade following the arrival of the conquistadors, around 80 per cent of the population of central Mexico died, wiped out by devastating communicable diseases brought to the continent by Hernán Cortés' invasion force and the other Spaniards arriving there.

Cortés and his allies retreated to Tlaxcala, where they were bolstered by unexpected supplies,



Branding slaves
On the shoulder of each captive, whether child or old man, the hot iron was applied. The letter G (for 'guerra', meaning 'war') was burned deep into the flesh, as a permanent brand.



Moctezuma II was the ninth ruler of Tenochtitlán

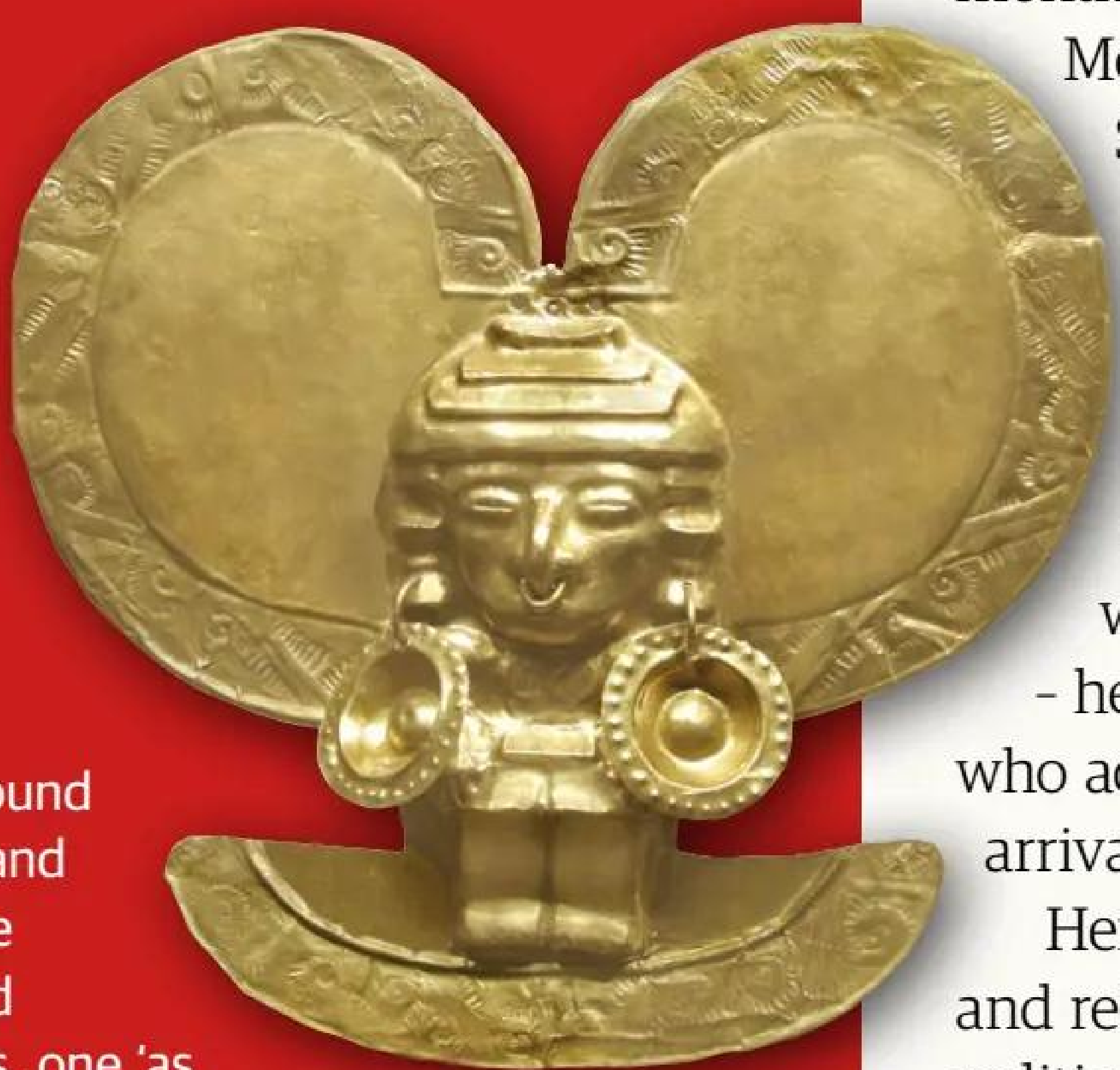
and started to build alliances among the towns that surround the lake on which Tenochtitlán lay. Over the next months, Cortés blockaded the capital – cutting the causeways from the mainland and controlling the lake with armed brigantines. The supply of food to the city was cut and the aqueduct carrying water to the city was blocked, while Cortés made continued attacks on the capital, itself besieged by terrible disease. Weakened by lack of provisions and smallpox and dispirited by the constant attacks, Tenochtitlán fell in 1521 after eight months of siege.

Cortés had conquered Mexico in a mere 30 months and went on to rebuild Tenochtitlán as Mexico City; the land was rechristened New Spain. Cortés introduced Christianity and outlawed human sacrifices. Tenochtitlán was razed to the ground and the first buildings of modern-day Mexico City were laid down. Intent on winning the peace after the war, Cortés established a society where sexual union was a founding principle – he even married La Malinche, the woman who acted as translator for him shortly after his arrival in South America.

Hernán Cortés brought European attitudes and religion to the continent. His abilities to form political alliances, ruthless military brain and desperation for power brought about the rapid end to one of the world's greatest civilisations, as well as the destruction of one of its most brilliant cities. More than any other person, Cortés birthed the modern-day Mexico. That this also brought about the fall of the Aztec civilisation mattered less to Cortés than the glorious plunder and power that his South American conquest provided.

A city paved with gold

Was the Aztec city as rich as legend depicts?



The vast majority of gold gifted to the Spanish was immediately melted down by conquistadors hungry for wealth and oblivious to the inherent value of the jewellery and ornaments created by the natives. Swiftly spirited out of the country, mercantilism and piracy probably meant that Aztec gold ended up in all corners of the globe. The amount of gold deposits in Mexico is also small, meaning the amount of gold looted by the Spaniards may have been exaggerated.

However, the Aztecs did not value gold – they called it "the excrement of the gods" – preferring to use it decoratively rather than as currency and were perturbed at the Spanish greed for it. Conceivably they were happy to give their reserves of gold to the Spaniards, not because it was so abundant, but because there was little significance attributed to it.

Ironically, it was possibly Moctezuma's use of gold as tributes to Cortés when the conquistadors landed that ensured Tenochtitlán's destruction. Rather than satisfying Cortés, the gold only increased his desire for more of it.

In a letter to the Spanish king in July 1519, Cortés listed around 50 golden treasures and precious stones in the form of necklaces and decorative ornaments, one 'as big as a cartwheel', and a Spanish helmet filled with gold dust. However, Cortés sent only a fifth of his total bounty to Spain as a tribute, meaning the real figure was around 200-250 items. The raids on Tenochtitlán's stores of treasure must have yielded a lot more booty, but much was lost in the retreat from the city on La Noche Triste. The true value of Aztec gold is likely to remain a mystery.

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After the Invasion

As the Aztec world crumbled beneath the boots of the conquistadors, it was built anew in the Spanish image

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

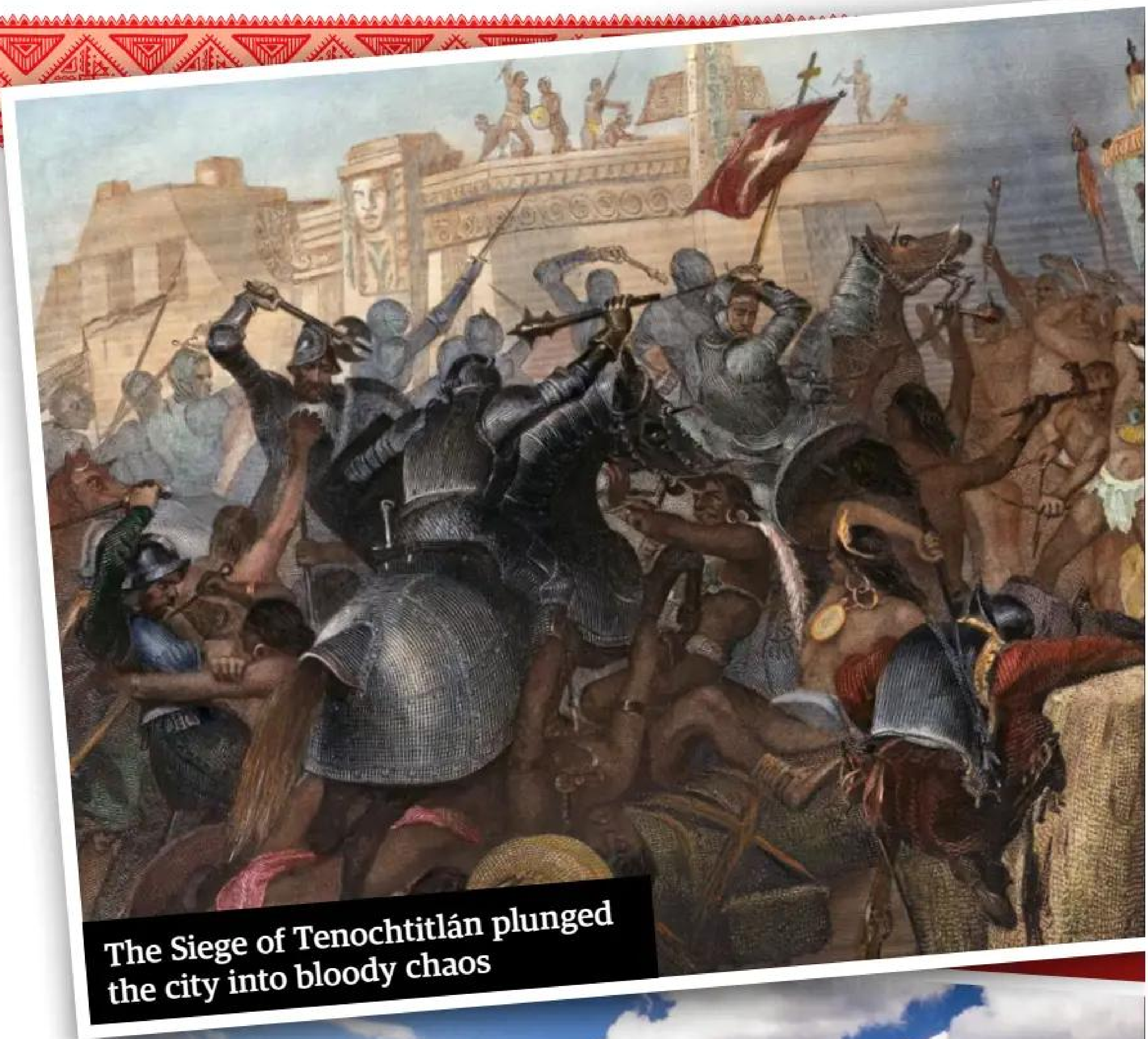
When the Spanish finally captured Tenochtitlán, the heart of the Aztec Empire, the city had endured 80 days of squalor. Following the death of Moctezuma and the initial expulsion of the conquistadors, the population had been decimated by smallpox, which killed Moctezuma's successor, Cuitláhuac. Besieged by land and sea, the Aztecs wandered among the corpses of their friends and relatives, exhausting every source of fresh water. Dying of hunger, they stripped the trees of bark and ploughed up roots in search of food. As Cortés made his way through the city's islets, street by street, he destroyed the buildings and used the rubble to fill the canal – turning the city into a stagnant, corpse-ridden swamp.

Once Emperor Cuauhtémoc finally surrendered the Spanish rooted through the city in search of gold. Meanwhile, the Spanish allies, the Tlaxcalans, Totonacs, Texcocans and Chalca, unleashed a tide of violence upon the vanquished, pulling them from of their hiding holes and clubbing them to death. They fed on their flesh – a symbolic gesture of conquest – and took home body parts, salted and dried, to give to their friends. By the day's end 100,000 Nahuas had been killed. For three days survivors crawled out of the city, nobles hidden behind a layer of dirt, all patted down by the Spanish for hidden gold.

All in all, the Spanish collected 130,000 castellanos – each worth 42.3 grams of pure silver – with one-fifth given to the crown and the rest distributed among the army, in accordance of rank. They also made off with gold ornaments, feather work and art, which were sent to Charles I of Spain, who, unimpressed, melted down the gold and sold off the art. However, the bulk of the city's treasures had disappeared during the conquistador's rout on La Noche Triste, and the wealthy Nahua merchants had since fled with what was left.

Having financed their own expeditions, rather than the vast riches they envisioned Cortés' men now faced mounting debts, with two years to pay it off. Refusing to accept there simply was not any booty left, they and the royal auditors accused Cortés of withholding his plunder. Panicked, and with a little coaxing from the royal auditor, he ordered Emperor Cuauhtémoc and the king of Tacuba to be tortured into revealing their hidden treasure by having their feet dipped in oil and set alight. This cruelty only yielded 200,000 pesos, which was split once again between the crown, Cortés, his officers and then their soldiers, who received a paltry 160 pesos each.

As news of the Aztec defeat spread neighbouring powers sent ambassadors to meet the conquerors. They were delighted at the collapse of their oppressive masters and awed by the ruins of Mexico, a symbol of Spanish might. The mighty Tarascan Empire in northwestern Michoacán immediately sent an envoy asking to become a Spanish vassal. Though Cortés agreed, his captain Cristóbal de Olid arrived with a large contingent of men, who proceeded to plunder, destroy temples



The Siege of Tenochtitlán plunged the city into bloody chaos

Having forged a powerful Andean empire, the Inca were promptly defeated by the manipulative Spanish conquistadors

The Inca Empire

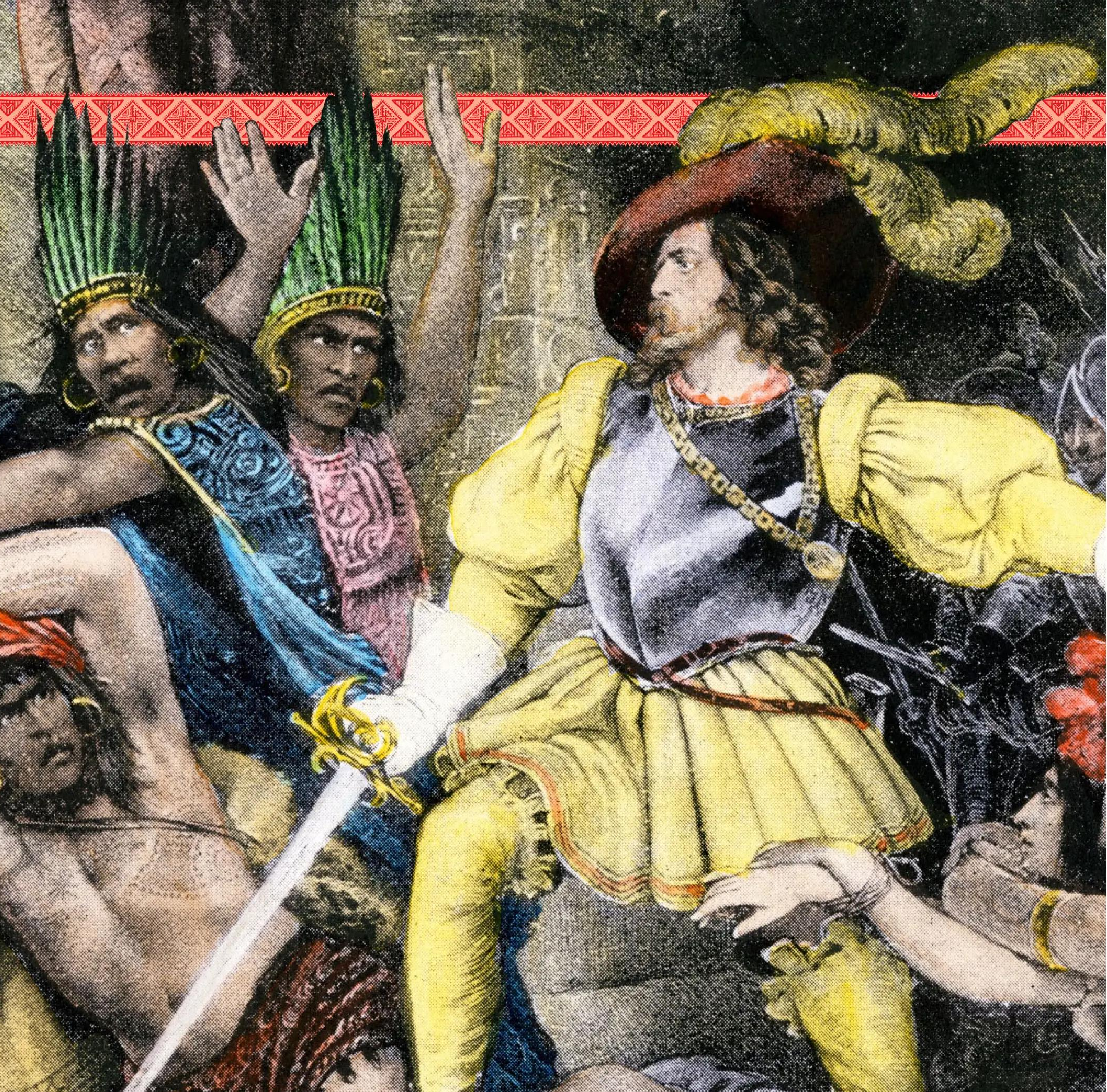
Despite its meteoric rise, the Inca Empire crumbled within a matter of years

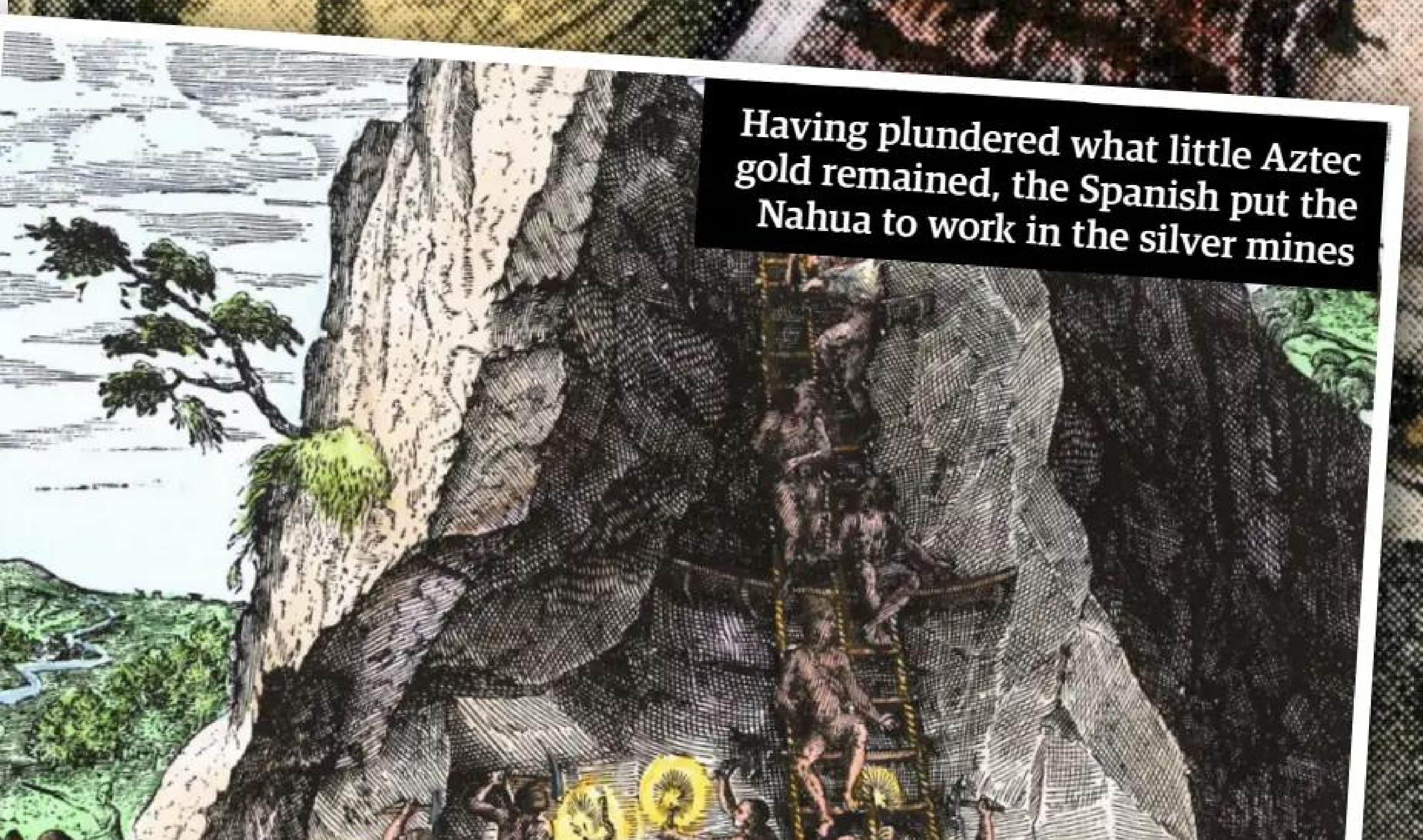
Having conquered its neighbours one by one, by the 16th century the Inca tribe had created the preeminent American empire. Their domain reached its zenith during the rule of Huayna Capac, stretching 4,000 kilometres along the western coast of South America, with awe-inspiring stone fortresses and temples connected via an elaborate network of roads.

While the Inca boasted a more cohesive domain than the Aztecs, they too were decimated by the smallpox outbreak and many of their vassal clans resented their authority. When the adventurous Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro set off with 180 men and 30 horses, Huayna Capac had recently died, leading to a civil war between his sons, Huáscar and Atahualpa. Though Pizarro had already arrived in Peru, he let the brothers exhaust one another, until Atahualpa emerged victorious in 1532. After a brief battle, he captured the emperor and the northern city of Cajamarca.

While in captivity Atahualpa had his brother killed before paying the Spanish a vast gold and silver ransom. However, despite being paid, Pizarro refused to release him, instead putting him on trial for murder, genocide, bigamy and corruption before having him executed.

After installing a puppet emperor, the Spanish consolidated their holdings, building cities such as Lima, while they and the remaining Inca fought among themselves for dominance and spoils. After 22 years in jail for the execution of his rival Almagro, Pizarro was later murdered by his former partner's loyalists – a violent end to the two men who subjugated the mighty Inca Empire.





Having plundered what little Aztec gold remained, the Spanish put the Nahua to work in the silver mines

Having conquered the Aztecs, Cortés immediately banned human sacrifice

The last Aztec ruler, Cuauhtémoc, was tortured and later executed

and kidnap the emperor, bringing him to Mexico, where he was simultaneously humiliated and acknowledged before being sent back. While Olid subjugated the north, Cortés brought the rich agricultural region of Pánuco into the empire. They were assisted all the while by the Nahua themselves, with Cuauhtémoc providing 15,000 men, helping the Spanish to conquer all of Mexico within a decade, except the Mayan-held Yucatán and the distant northern territories.

Worshipping Xipe Totec, the Aztec god of disease and goldsmiths, involved flaying a slave and then wearing their skin

With his territory growing, Cortés needed a strong bureaucratic headquarters, and there was no better site than the defeated capital of Tenochtitlán. Rather than letting the ruins become a shrine, stoking patriotic vengeance among the defeated Aztecs, he rebuilt it in the Spanish image. While he initially attempted to preserve some pre-Hispanic cities, the Spanish soon adopted a policy of wiping out pyramids and temples across New Spain.

When in 1524 Cortés heard that Olid had rebelled 1,500 miles away in Honduras, he led an expedition of thousands of Spaniards and natives to remind him of his place, unaware that Olid had already been killed. He took with him the kings of Mexico and Tacuba and scores of indigenous lords. They returned two years later, whittled down to 100 survivors by hunger, disease and mutiny.

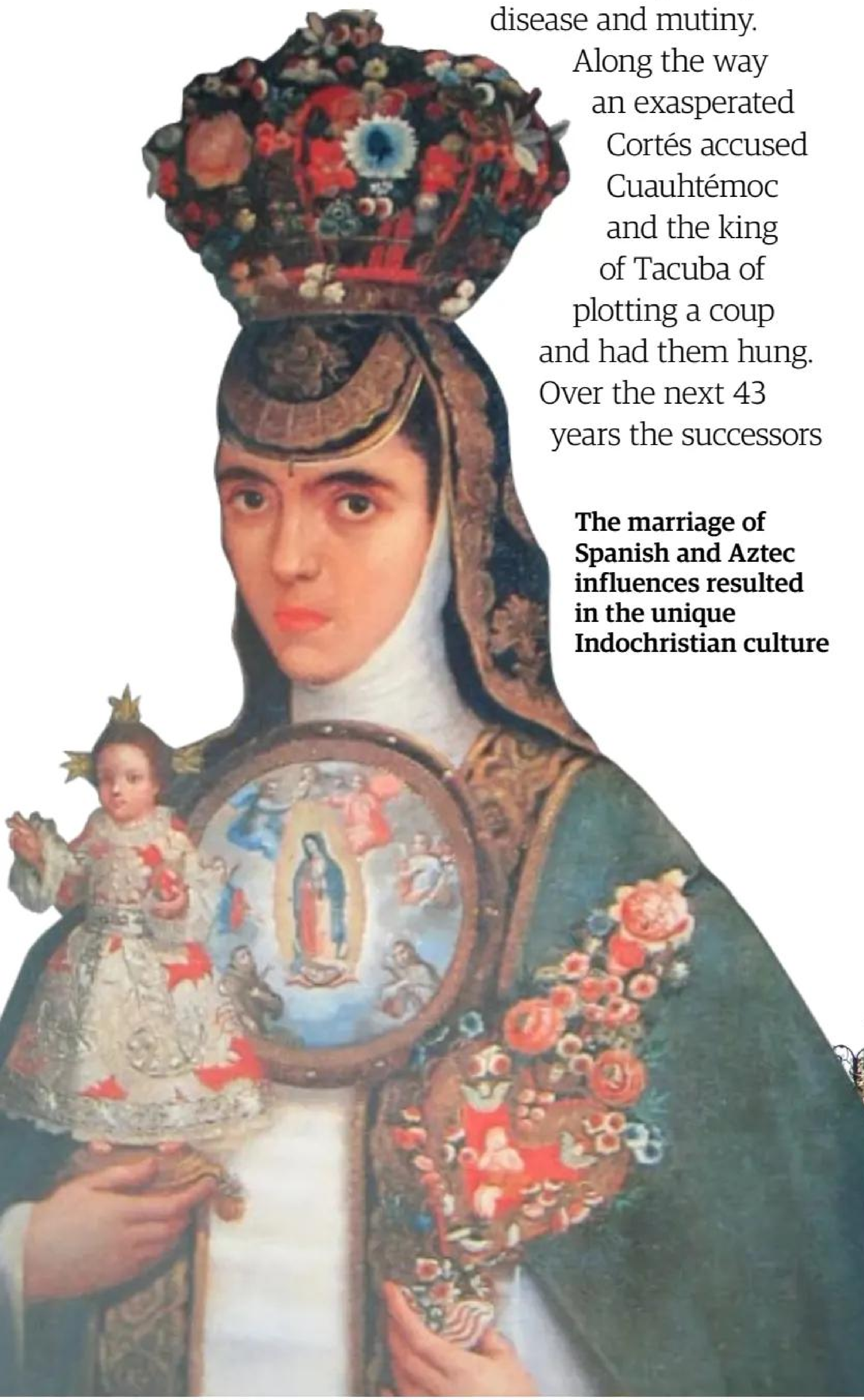
Along the way an exasperated Cortés accused Cuauhtémoc and the king of Tacuba of plotting a coup and had them hung. Over the next 43 years the successors of Moctezuma would increasingly adopt Spanish mannerisms, culminating in the last 'king', Luis de Santa María Cipac, who was essentially a glorified local governor.

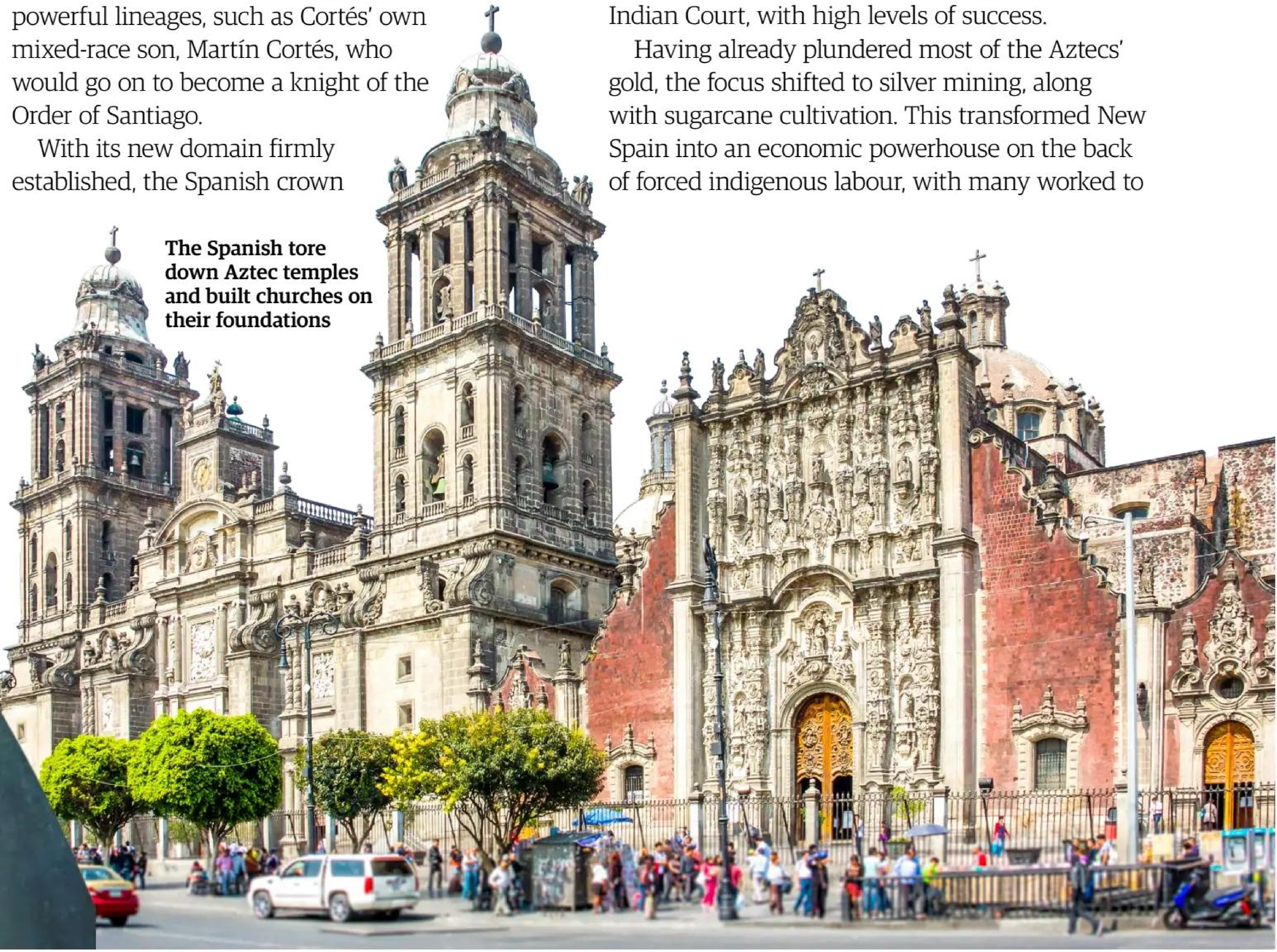
While the conquistadors had greedily enslaved their subjects in the West Indies, Cortés had only been able to conquer Mexico with the help of local allies, who would not easily walk into the chains of slavery. However, the 607 conquistadors who first accompanied him, and the 534 who joined later, demanded rewards for their suffering. To keep them from stripping the land and returning home with the spoils, Cortés reluctantly adopted the encomienda system, introduced in the Caribbean, which granted conquistador overlords, or encomenderos, the right to extract labour and tribute from natives living on certain pockets of land. In return they were expected to protect, proselytise and ready them for war.

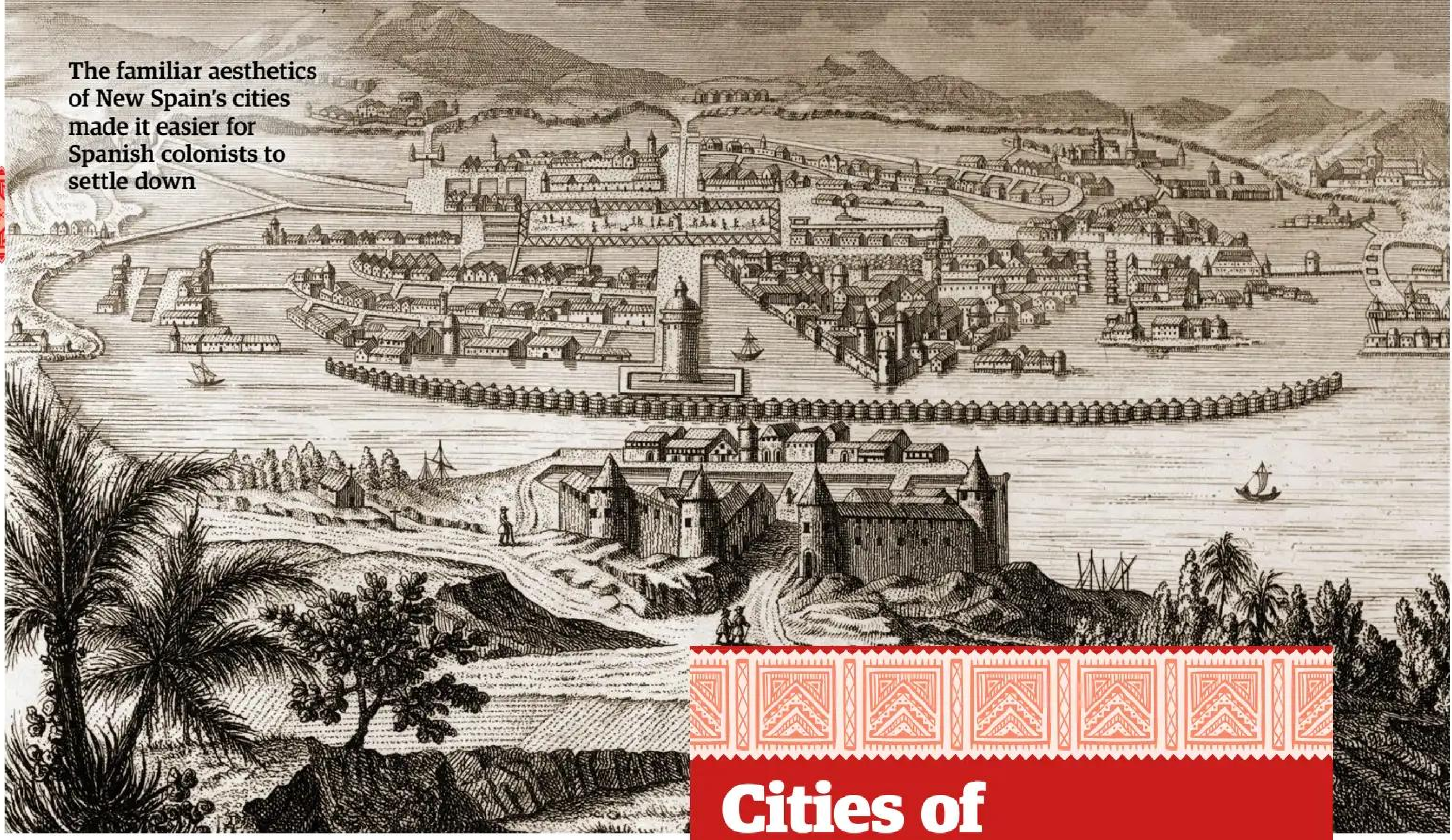
However, the Nahua were still reeling from the smallpox epidemic, along with subsequent measles, typhus, mumps and other outbreaks. Between 1519 and 1521 the population of the Valley of Mexico dropped from 1.6 million to 900,000, falling to just 200,000 by 1580. Simultaneously, the Spanish began shipping over colonists to inhabit their new settlements. In 1524 Cortés decreed that all married soldiers had 18 months to bring their wives to the country and bachelors must marry or forfeit their property. By the mid-16th century there were around 100,000 Spanish settlers living in New Spain. However, with Spanish women only constituting a quarter of them, many men instead married local women. Such unions usually produced powerful lineages, such as Cortés' own mixed-race son, Martín Cortés, who would go on to become a knight of the Order of Santiago.

With its new domain firmly established, the Spanish crown began to cement its grip on the bureaucracy of its burgeoning empire. While Cortés himself was made Marqués Del Valle de Oaxaca and granted sizeable estates, he was stripped of his administrative power, which was handed over to a network of civil servants sent to rule over his conquests. This hierarchy was topped by the viceroy, followed by oidores - judges - and then administrators. The latter, given quasi-legislative, judicial and administrative powers, were introduced to counter the influence of the private encomenderos over local traditional communities. Most of these posts were filled by early conquistadors. While they served the crown the benefits were low, and many took to abusing their powers and defrauding the locals, often in collaboration with local chiefs. However, suits could be filed through the General Indian Court, with high levels of success.

Having already plundered most of the Aztecs' gold, the focus shifted to silver mining, along with sugarcane cultivation. This transformed New Spain into an economic powerhouse on the back of forced indigenous labour, with many worked to


The marriage of Spanish and Aztec influences resulted in the unique Indochristian culture


The Spanish tore down Aztec temples and built churches on their foundations



The familiar aesthetics of New Spain's cities made it easier for Spanish colonists to settle down

death. Some of the surviving Nahua nobles learned Spanish, desperate to carve out a role in the new world they now inhabited. They became a class of figurehead sub-rulers, culturally beholden to the Spanish, some even wearing Spanish garb, riding horses and carrying a sword and arquebus.

The initial psychological impact of the old world's collapse was immense. The Aztecs had considered themselves the chosen people of Huitzilopochtli, the Sun God of War, ruling in his name. Their defeat was not just theirs but his - earthly and heavenly life had lost all meaning. The infrastructure of the Aztec state religion collapsed and human sacrifice was immediately outlawed.

Many Indians found the shock too great to bear. Their self-contained world had been dismantled, their food production methods undermined by Spanish crops and livestock and their bodies thrust into unfamiliar forced labour, serving exploitative encomenderos charging arbitrary tribute. Those who did not kill themselves retreated to the embrace of pulque, alcohol made from fermented sap, previously reserved strictly for religious ceremonies. While the Spanish outwardly flogged and chastised alcoholics they also sold them wine.

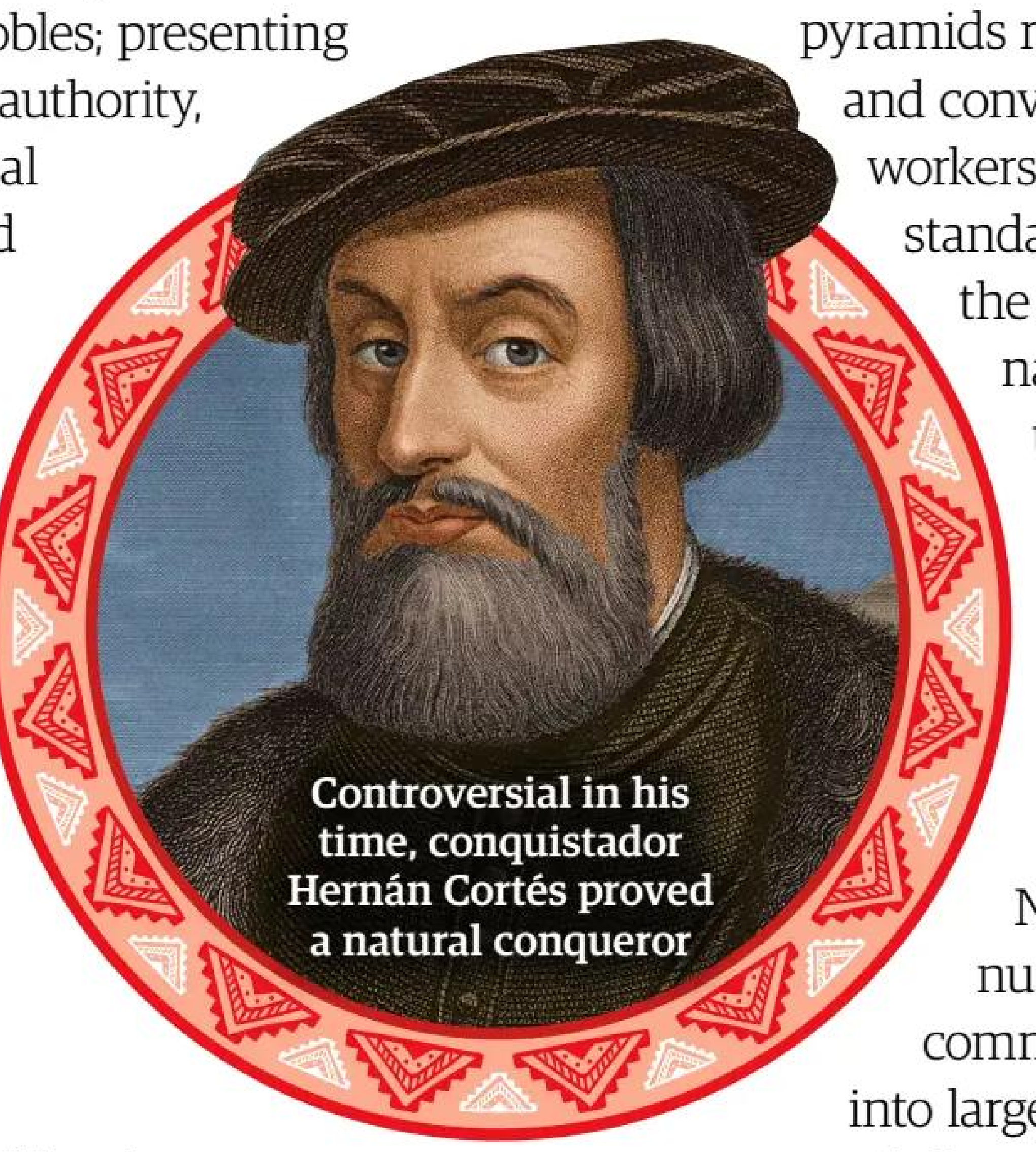
However, as the new order arose many others found their daily lives little interrupted. Traditional altepetl states preserved the Nahuatl language and culture for centuries. Their townships and cities were presided over by Aztec nobles; presenting a neutered front of indigenous authority, with native-controlled municipal councils. Peasants still laboured over the land in the name of a new distant master, rarely leaving the familiarity of their local communities and thereby preserving their indigenous culture in the place of nobles and priests. They were instead indoctrinated via religion.

The first 12 Franciscan missionaries arrived in 1524, later joined by Dominican and Augustinian friars. Travelling along the frontiers, they learned local languages with the aid of Nahua scribes and carried out mass baptisms. They provided a bridge between the two cultures, which had previously suffered from a severe lack of communication. The friars studied Aztec religion in order to better understand how to communicate the Christian doctrine to them, sprinkling a little music and imagery along the way. In the process, they became their protectors.

In the Nahua view of the universe the concepts of faith and religion were inseparable from that of culture, and their embrace of Christianity resulted in a unique symbiosis of Aztec and Christian beliefs. They filtered the doctrine through the lens of folklore, resulting in the Indochristian culture. Some friars lamented that instead of worshipping 1,000 gods, the Nahua now worshipped 1,001. Saints were interpreted as deities and crucifixion was idealised through the prism of sacrifice.

Though in practice they would continue to live as serfs, the New Laws of 1542 protected these new Christians, giving the Spanish less moral justification for their exploitation. The Mendicant orders notably stood with the Indians against various encomendero abuses. However, when they too began to rely on indigenous taxes and labour they fell silent. Idolaters were frequently executed, while lifetime imprisonment and torture were also employed in the name of God.

Regardless, the faith was welcomed warmly across central Mexico, with magnificent Aztec pyramids replaced by epic monasteries and convents - built by masses of workers to deliberately spectacular standards - to sufficiently impress the glory of God upon the natives. These were built atop the foundations of torn down Aztec temples, providing a degree of continuity over existing holy sites while also symbolising the omnipotence of the Christian God. With the Nahua still dying in huge numbers, their scattered communities were amalgamated into larger congregations centred around churches. People were torn from their homelands and given new plots of land elsewhere, forbidden to return. This resulted in multi-ethnic communities, where people of different backgrounds and languages converged, further weakening their cultural bonds. By 1600 the Spanish had built 300 new towns in their image. Magnificent cities served as strongholds, with urbanisation not only making it easier for the Spanish crown to tax its subjects, but also to protect residents from exploitation.



Controversial in his time, conquistador Hernán Cortés proved a natural conqueror

As the Spanish went on to defeat the Inca, Mexico became the headquarters of New Spain, the centre of a vast empire stretching from California to Costa Rica and reaching as far as the Philippines. Though the Spanish had torn the heart from the former Aztec Empire, in rural areas people retained the same architecture, tools, languages and lifestyles. It would take a century for glazed ceramics and iron nails to reach these distant people. Nonetheless, soon their lives too would eventually be incorporated into the new order, as Spanish increasingly replaced the Nahuatl language. In the process, the Spanish and Nahua increasingly married, later joined by African slaves, creating a cultural lineage that survives today in the rich heritage of modern Mexico. By the 17th century most of the population were mixed-race, sadly giving rise to a caste system.

Though the conquistadors succeeded in destroying the former Aztec institutions and gradually replacing the indigenous culture, today more than 1 million Nahua Indians still speak Nahuatl, testament to the Aztec's enduring spirit.

Cities of New Spain

New Spain was built atop the foundations of the former Aztec Empire

With Tenochtitlán in ruins, Cortés established a temporary headquarters at the neighbouring Coyoacán, where he drew up plans for the new capital, redesigning it in strict accordance to the Spanish Royal Ordinance for the Laying Out of Towns. Once the Nahua had cleaned the streets, the aqueduct would be repaired and the centre flattened, rebuilt with Spanish-style buildings along a grid, with the surrounding neighbourhoods divided into districts, with only one quarter reserved for the city's previous inhabitants. Aztec monuments and temples made way for Spanish churches, palaces and forts. Stones from the former buildings were reused in the foundations of new ones, lowering costs and symbolising the victory of the Christian god over the Aztec ones. Many Nahua died rebuilding the city, overworked and underfed.

The cities of New Spain were based on Spanish design, with a central plaza boasting a main church on one end and the town hall at the other. These sat alongside the central institutions of colonial authority: the courts, the viceroy's palace and the prison. Wealthy Spanish colonists sought to live as close to the plaza as possible as a show of status. The surrounding areas were divided into indigenous neighbourhoods, where non-Indians were forbidden from living. They ostensibly enjoyed the right to self-governance, through the traditional cabildo local authority though this was subject to Spanish or church rule. However, it was not possible to maintain this system for long, as Mexico City became a cultural melting pot of Spaniards, Indians, Africans and their mixed-race descendants.

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What if…
The Aztecs hadn't been conquered?

MEXICO, 1519

Written by Jack Griffiths

MATTHEW RESTALL

Matthew Restall is a professor of Colonial Latin American History at Penn State University. His areas of specialisation are Yucatán and Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, Maya history, the Spanish conquest and Africans in Spanish America. He has co-authored four books published in 2011 and 2012 including *2012 And The End Of The World: The Western Roots Of The Maya Apocalypse* and *Latin America In Colonial Times*.

HELEN COWIE

Helen Cowie is a lecturer in History at the University of York. She is the author of *Conquering Nature In Spain And Its Empire, 1750-1850* and *Exhibiting Animals In Nineteenth-Century Britain: Empathy, Education, Entertainment*. She is currently writing a book on the cultural history of the alpaca.

What would have happened if the Aztecs hadn't been conquered by the Spanish?
Helen Cowie: It's easy to imagine that the conquest of the Aztecs was inevitable thanks to the superiority of the weapons used by the Spanish conquistadors (steel swords, crossbows, harquebuses and cannons against obsidian swords, slings and bows and arrows). If we look in detail at the events of the conquest, however, it becomes clear that Cortés's victory was by no means certain, and that his expedition could quite easily have ended in failure. On several occasions the Spanish stared defeat in the face – most dramatically during the so-called 'Noche Triste', when they were forced to flee Tenochtitlán after an ill-judged massacre of Aztec nobles. Without the continued support of indigenous allies such as the Tlaxcallans, the conquest could not have been achieved. It was also the devastating effects of disease, as much as technology and horses that destabilised Aztec society politically. But for luck at several critical junctures, Cortés could easily have lost.
Matthew Restall: The invasion campaign led by Hernan Cortés came very close to failure. Most of the men who crossed to Mexico from the Caribbean in 1519 and 1520 died during the war against the Aztecs, and Cortés himself narrowly escaped death. But if Cortés had perished before the Aztec defeat, the final outcome of the war would surely have been very similar: one of his fellow captains, such as Pedro de Alvarado, would have continued the campaign in much the same way. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the high mortality rate of the conquistadors and their allies, combined with the death of key captains and a failure of leadership, might have forced the survivors to retreat back to Cuba.

What effect would it have had on future attempts from the Old World to conquer the New?
Cowie: It's hard to imagine the Spanish would have abandoned attempts to conquer the Aztecs had Cortés been defeated. Further expeditions would probably have been mounted, perhaps with larger numbers of troops. Assisted by the effects of disease – a fatal legacy of Cortés's expedition – they would probably have won through in the end, although possibly at a much higher cost. Whether they would have been able to attract indigenous allies as easily as Cortés did in the wake of his defeat is another question. The Spanish attracted [indigenous] supporters because they appeared to be a successful fighting force, capable of standing up to their Aztec enemies. Had Cortés been defeated or killed, this aura of invincibility would have been lost, making indigenous backing harder to find.

What would the Aztecs have learnt from the Europeans? Would they have modernised over time using European technology such as guns to their advantage?
Restall: Yes, they would certainly would have done so, just as other indigenous or Native American groups did in later centuries – think of the warriors of the northern plains riding horses and using rifles, both to great effect. Indeed, during the Spanish-Aztec war, Aztecs captured and used Spanish weapons and armour. Had the war turned into a series of campaigns over years or decades, Spanish conquistadors would surely have ended up facing Aztec warriors with steel weapons and possibly even guns.
Cowie: There is evidence the Aztecs were already starting to learn how to counteract European weaponry and tactics during the course of Cortés's campaign. To avoid the projectiles fired by Spanish cannon and harquebuses, for instance, Aztec soldiers moved from side to side while marching, rather than in straight lines. To neutralise the advantage of Spanish cavalry, they erected barricades in the streets and avoided combat on flat, open terrain, which favoured horses. Had Cortés lost, it is possible the Aztecs might have adapted their military tactics further and become more capable of defeating European soldiers. They might also have learned something of the Spaniards' aims and mentality in war and adopted a more aggressive strategy in dealing with future attempted invasions.

If the Aztecs had withstood the Spanish conquest, they could have begun to use new weaponry

> "Spanish conquistadors would surely have ended up facing Aztec warriors with steel weapons and possibly even guns"

Would the Aztecs have expanded and conquered the rest of the continent?

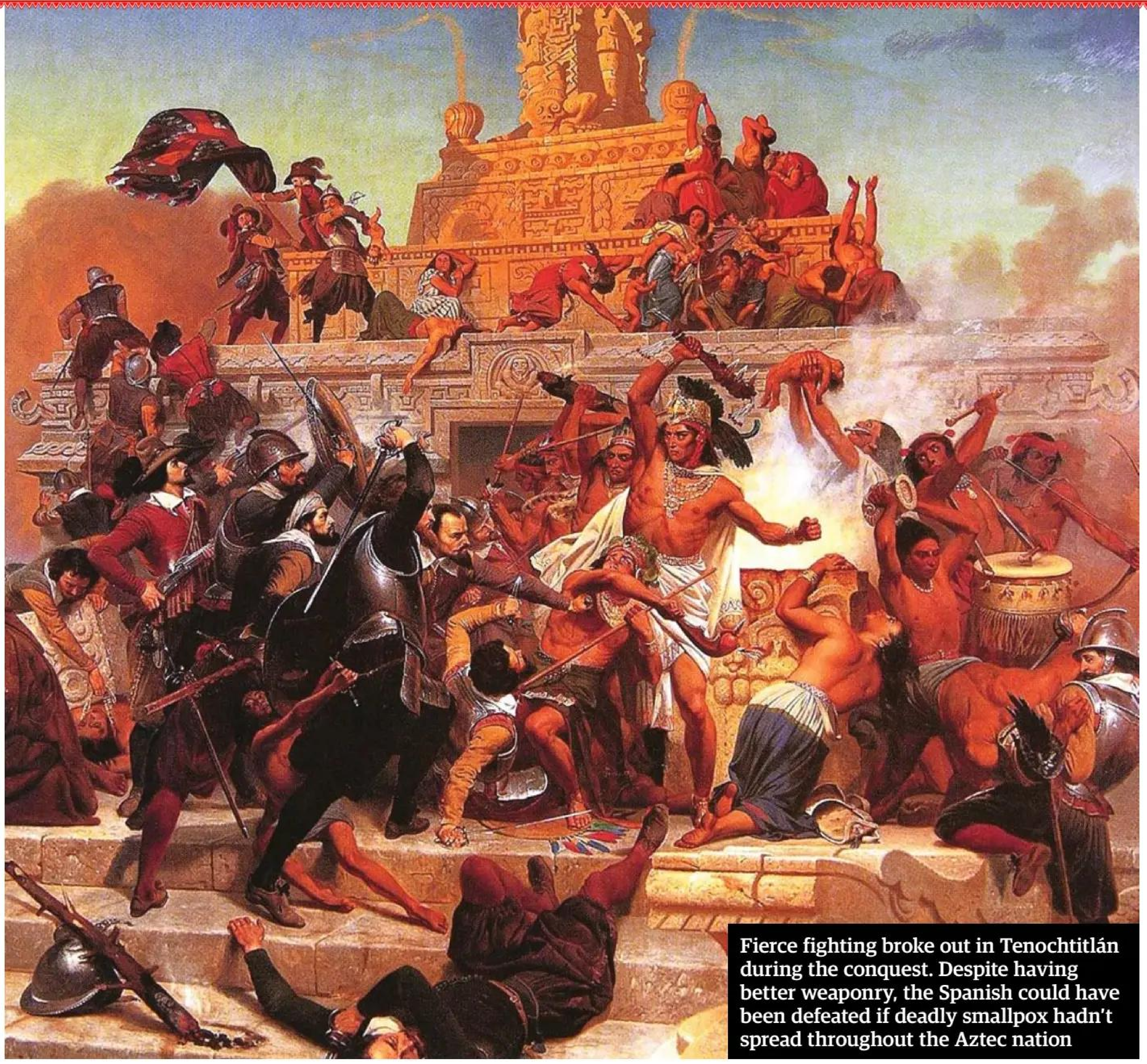
Restall: It is interesting to speculate on how the Aztec acquisition of horses and Spanish technologies of war might have allowed them to consolidate and expand their empire. The Aztecs appeared to have been poised to expand south into the Maya area by 1519, and [there is] no doubt they would have been able to achieve that.

Cowie: This is doubtful as the Aztec Empire was quite loosely structured. Rather than imposing their own systems of government, language and religion on the people they conquered, they tended to leave existing leaders in place and simply extract tribute (a form of taxation) from them. There's little reason to imagine this system of government would have changed following a failed Spanish conquest, though the Aztecs would probably have exacted punishment on those former allies who proved disloyal and re-doubled their efforts to crush the Tlaxcallans. Though they traded across a wide region for luxury items such as jade, feathers and jaguar pelts, it seems unlikely the Aztecs would have been able to enforce a more formal empire of conquest.

Would they have become a trading partner to the European powers?

Restall: Had the Aztecs been able to fend off the Spaniards for generations, another factor would have complicated imperial interaction in the New World: the increased presence there of the Dutch, French, and English. In later centuries, the Spanish, French and English used alliances with indigenous groups to wage war against each other and compete for territory and colonial control.

Cowie: This seems unlikely. The Aztecs did trade extensively across Mesoamerica, but it is questionable whether the Spanish would have settled for a commercial relationship of this kind. The Spanish wanted vast quantities of gold and



Fierce fighting broke out in Tenochtitlán during the conquest. Despite having better weaponry, the Spanish could have been defeated if deadly smallpox hadn't spread throughout the Aztec nation

> "The fact the Aztec Empire collapsed after two years of warfare has influenced how we see the Aztecs"

How would it be different?

Real timeline

Aztecs become the dominant force
With victory over the Tepanec at Azcapotzalco, the Aztecs become the major civilisation in Central America with their culture, architecture and language dominating the region. **1428**

Discovery of the New World
In search of new land and trading opportunities, Christopher Columbus becomes the first to discover the New World. After this, many Europeans make the journey across the Atlantic.
12 October 1492

Severe flooding
The Aztec capital Tenochtitlán is ravaged by severe flooding. This, in addition to famines and more floods, weakens the Aztecs before the Spanish conquistadors arrive.
1510

Comet spotted
A comet is reportedly spotted flying across the sky on this date. In Aztec culture they are an omen, believed to signify impending doom and worried emperor, Moctezuma II.
1517

First Cortés landing
The Spanish Conquistadors arrive in the Yucatán with a small force that is easily beaten after clashing with natives. They vow to return with a larger force.
February 1517

Beginning of the conquest
Cortés lands in Yucatán again after having set sail from Cuba with 11 ships and 500 men. He desires to claim this part of the New World for himself.
4 March 1519

Cortés arrives in Tenochtitlán
The conquistadors arrive in the Aztec capital, receive gifts from Aztec leader Moctezuma II and take residence in his palace.
8 November 1519

1428

Real timeline

Alternate timeline

silver, which had to be mined, and souls to convert to Christianity, neither of which could have been achieved without formal conquest.

How would a failed invasion have affected Europe?

Restall: I think a failed Spanish invasion of the 1520s would have been followed by further Spanish invasions, and that the impact of epidemic disease and repeated invasions would have destroyed the Aztec Empire by the end of the decade. However, let us imagine the Aztecs survive such attacks, borrow Spanish technology, and maintain their empire through the 16th century. That would have drawn intense interest from other European powers, such as the English. It might seem like a stretch to imagine the English conquering the Aztecs in the 17th century. But then consider that the English (later British) did establish a considerable empire in regions to the north, east and south of what had been Aztec Mexico. Furthermore, the heirs to part of the empire – the United States – conquered and permanently acquired half of the nation that was the heir to Aztec Mexico.

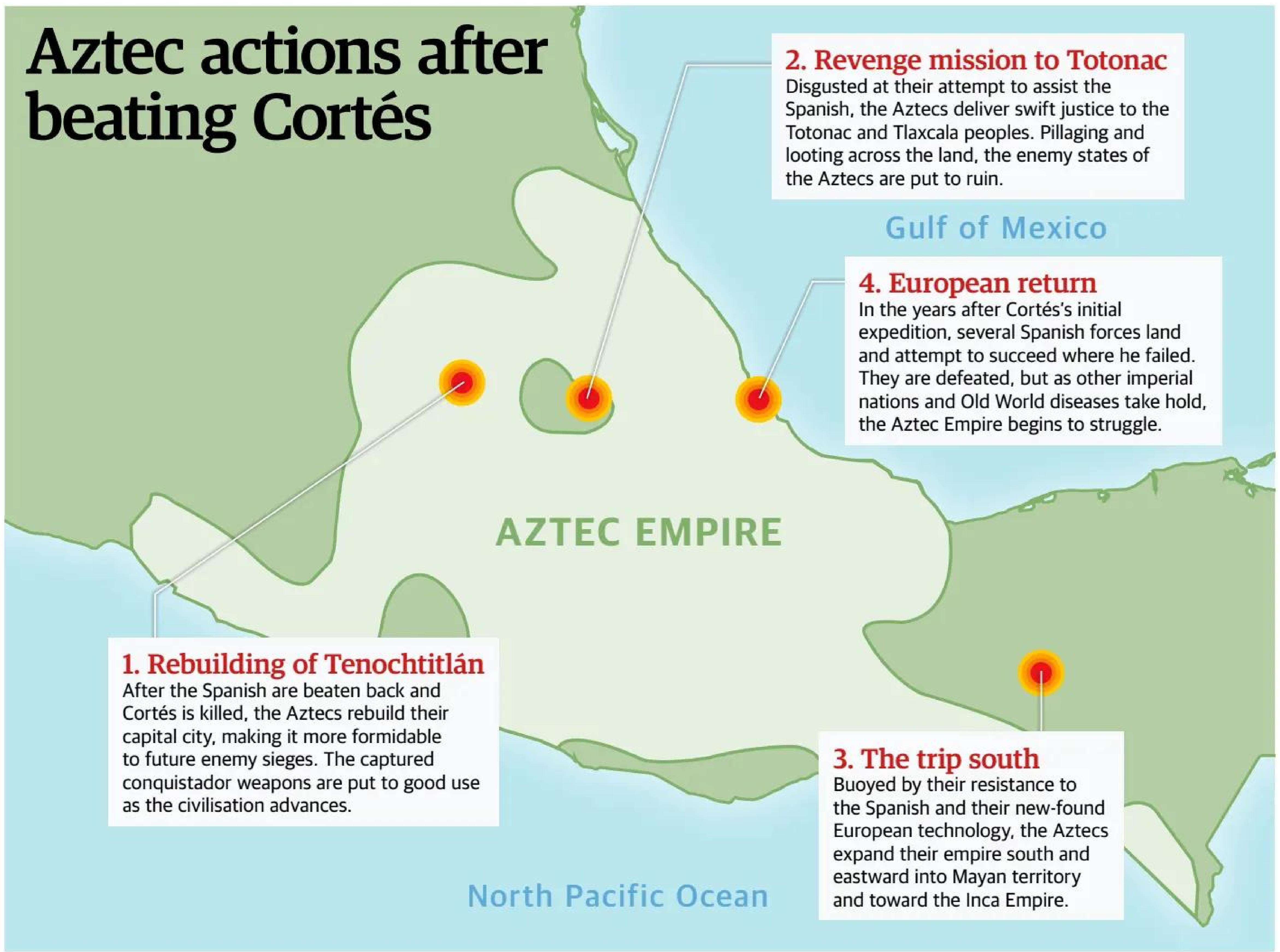
Cowie: Failure to conquer the Aztecs (and subsequently the Incas) would have had serious implications for Spain, which came to rely on American silver to finance its military campaigns in Europe. Within the context of the Reformation and the religious wars then raging in the Old World, it would also have had a significant impact on the global spread of Catholicism.

How might we look at the Aztec civilisation differently today?

Restall: The fact the Aztec Empire collapsed after two years of warfare has certainly influenced how we see the Aztecs. The Spaniards justified their invasion and colonisation of the region by portraying the Aztec civilisation as barbarian and bloody. In particular, they emphasized the Aztec practice of human sacrifice – even though the Spanish, English, and other Europeans also held public executions for political and religious reasons – and wrongly accused the Aztecs of practising cannibalism. Although we now have a complex and more balanced understanding of the Aztecs' past, the negative stereotypes propagated by the Spaniards have survived in the popular imagination. But had the Aztecs survived the Spanish invasions of 1519 to 1521, especially if their empire had lasted long enough to establish alliances or diplomatic relationships with other European powers, we would probably now know much more about life in the Aztec world and see it in less stereotypical terms.

Cowie: This is very difficult to say; it depends to a considerable degree upon whether the Aztecs were subsequently conquered by another Spanish expedition or whether they remained independent into the 19th century, when they would likely have become victims of a later wave of European imperialism. Either way, it is likely the negative images of human sacrifice would endure, assuming that at least some of the conquistadors survived to communicate them, but we might perhaps have greater respect for the Aztecs' military capability and realise the conquest was a close-run thing.

Aztec actions after beating Cortés



1. Rebuilding of Tenochtitlán
After the Spanish are beaten back and Cortés is killed, the Aztecs rebuild their capital city, making it more formidable to future enemy sieges. The captured conquistador weapons are put to good use as the civilisation advances.

2. Revenge mission to Totonac
Disgusted at their attempt to assist the Spanish, the Aztecs deliver swift justice to the Totonac and Tlaxcala peoples. Pillaging and looting across the land, the enemy states of the Aztecs are put to ruin.

3. The trip south
Buoyed by their resistance to the Spanish and their new-found European technology, the Aztecs expand their empire south and eastward into Mayan territory and toward the Inca Empire.

4. European return
In the years after Cortés's initial expedition, several Spanish forces land and attempt to succeed where he failed. They are defeated, but as other imperial nations and Old World diseases take hold, the Aztec Empire begins to struggle.

Battle of Cempoala
Cortés and his forces briefly leave Tenochtitlán to fight, and eventually defeat, fellow Spaniard Diego Velázquez, an old enemy of Cortés.
April 1520

La Noche Triste
The two forces assault the Aztecs but are driven back despite the death of Moctezuma. This escape from Tenochtitlán results in many Spanish deaths.
July 1520

Tenochtitlán falls
A combination of smallpox, horses and Spanish steel defeat Tenochtitlán after a three-month siege as the population is routed. **August 1521**

Birth of Mexico City
Tenochtitlán is rebuilt as Mexico City, the new capital of New Spain. Cuauhetemoc serves as a puppet ruler before his execution. **1522**

Death of Cortés
Immediately wary of the Old World invaders, Moctezuma instructs a full-on attack on the Spanish. Surprised and overwhelmed, Cortés is killed and his forces scattered.
8 November 1519

Cortés allies with Tlazcala
The Spanish ally with the sworn enemy of the Aztecs, the Tlaxcala. They want the Aztec civilisation to crumble as much as Cortés desires gold and riches.
July 1520

Religious changes
With Mexico still resisting invasion, the spread of Catholicism is halted while traditional Aztec religion and culture flourishes. **June 1525**

Spread of smallpox
This Old World disease is brought over by the European raiders and becomes an epidemic, wiping out swathes of the Aztec population.
August 1520

Further expeditions
Further Spanish excursions, along with the introduction of Old World diseases, gradually wears down the civilisation.
1640

Death of Cortés
Hernan Cortés dies at the age of 62. The conqueror of the Aztecs, he is remembered as a great explorer but also as a man of greed.
1567

New technology
Using trial and error and interrogating Spanish prisoners, the Aztecs gain the knowledge of horse riding, making steel weapons and using guns. **January 1520**

Financial effects on the Old World
Having no Aztec gold to speak of, Spain struggles financially and thus modernises at a slower rate.
February 1520

Destruction of Tlaxcala
As punishment for allying with the Spanish, the Tlaxcalans are completely massacred, ensuring they will never trouble the Aztecs again.
April 1520

Cancellation of Pizarro conquest
The planned occupation of Peru and the Inca Empire is cancelled, as the Spanish cannot afford it.
1532

Further advancements
Having mastered steel, the Aztecs incorporate other Western technology into their military such as musket and cannon.
1781

Fall of the Aztecs
After repeated Spanish invasions, continuing disease and even French and British involvement, the Aztecs fall.
1819

© Illustration by Ian Hinley

AZTEC LEGACY

Discover how the Aztecs live on, both on the landscape and in Mexican culture, traditions, and artwork

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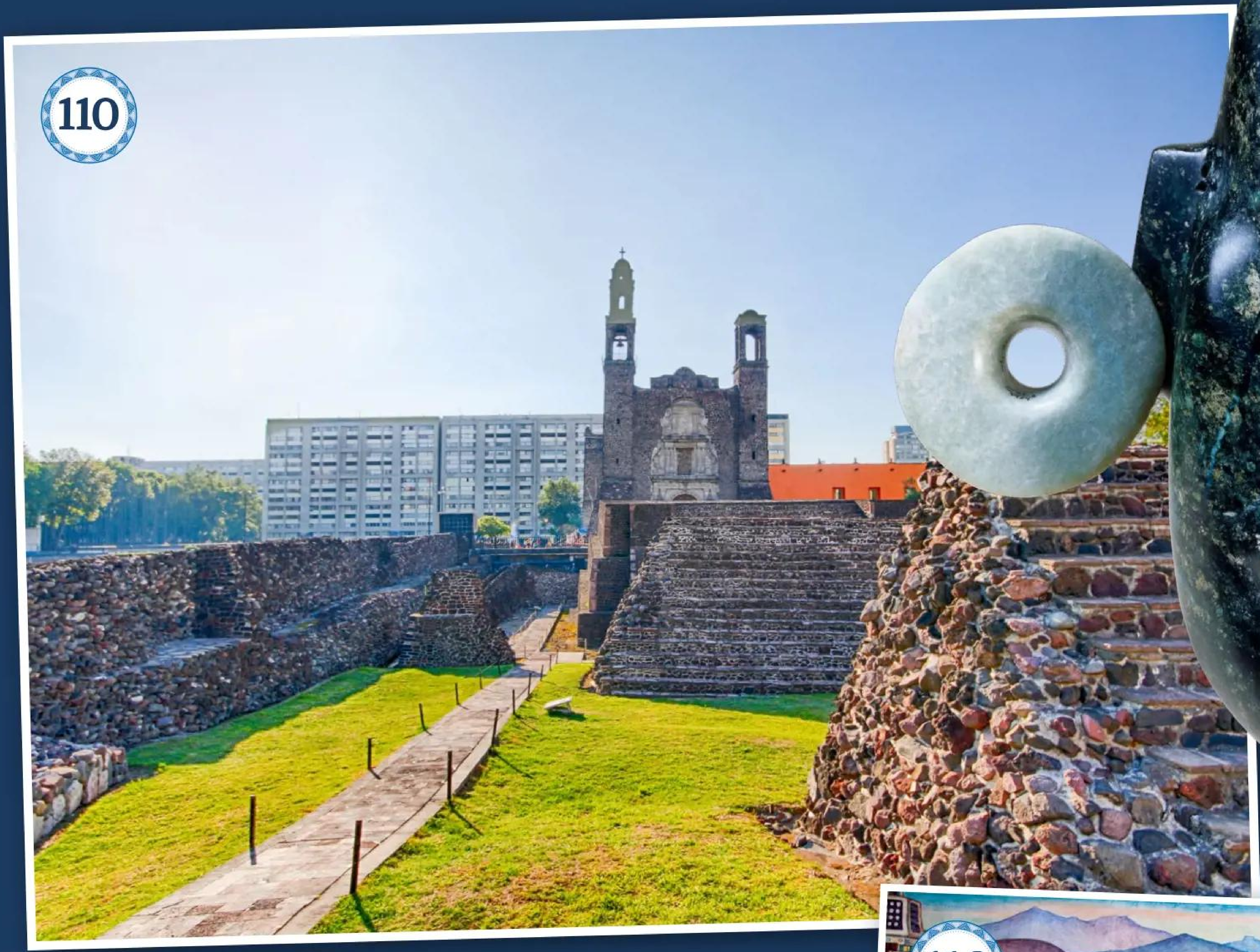
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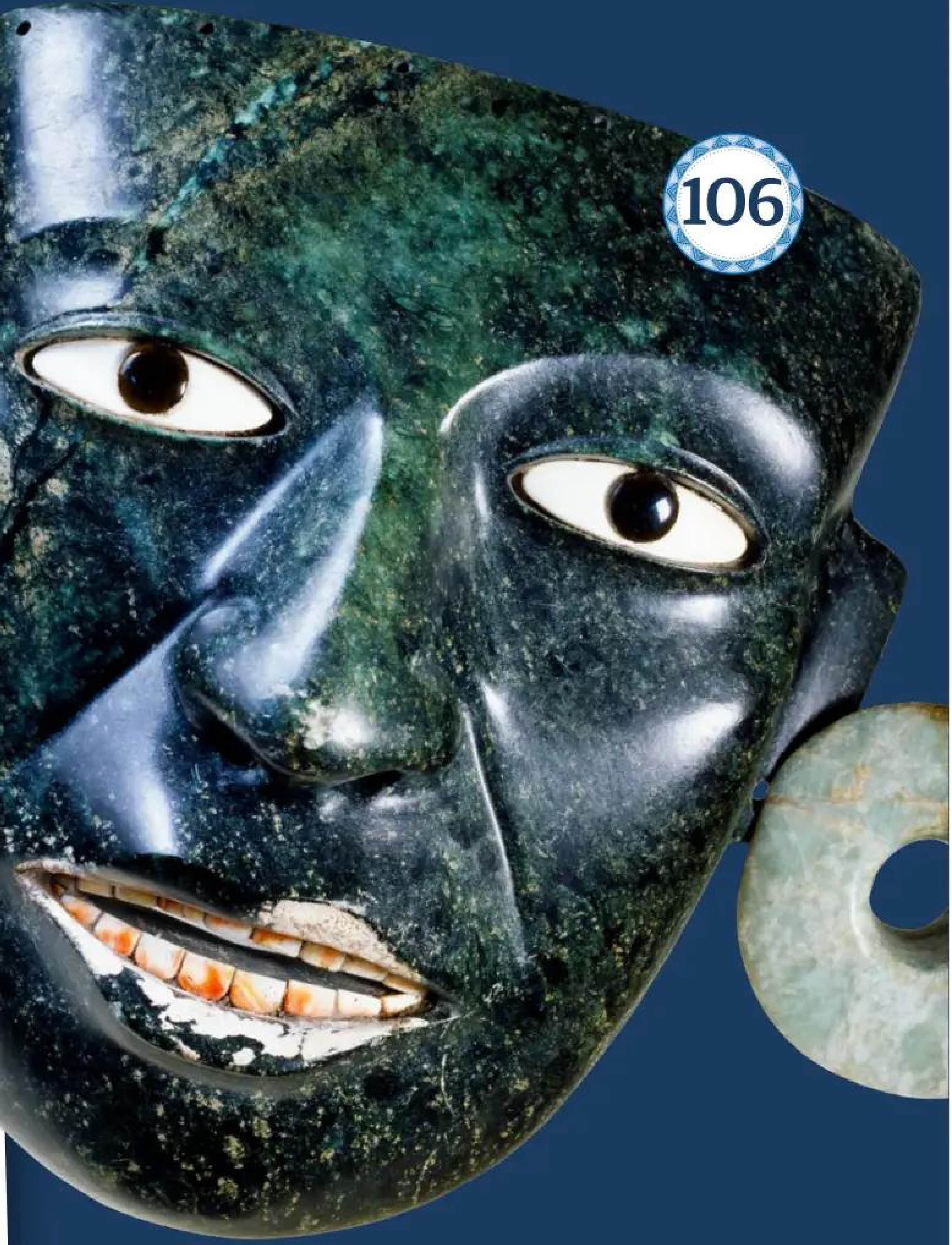
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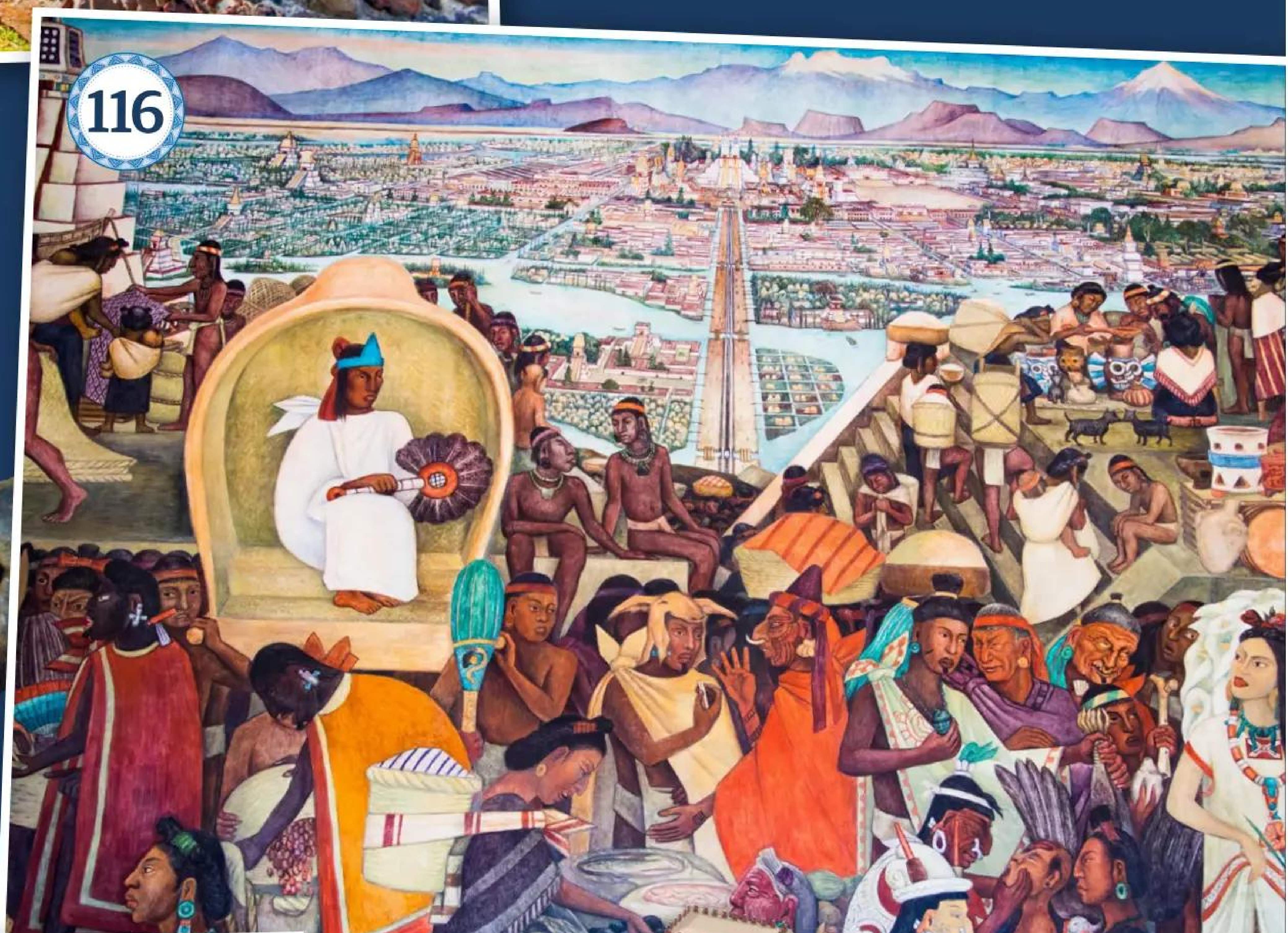
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Remains of Aztec offerings. Who knows how much more there is to be excavated?

Rediscovering Tenochtitlán

Dig up Mexico City's Aztec past with the archaeologists who have made stunning discoveries over the past few decades

Written by Scott Reeves

On 21 February 1978, workers laying electrical cables in Mexico City made the discovery of a lifetime. They were digging up the road in a place known throughout the city as the Island of the Dogs, so called because it was slightly higher than surrounding neighbourhoods and, when flood waters inundated the city, street dogs would congregate there. As the digger reached a depth of two metres, it scraped against a large stone. When the workers looked at the obstruction more closely, they saw it was covered in fine carvings.

Moving the stone took considerable effort - it weighed more than eight tonnes - but the archaeologists who retrieved it soon realised they had stumbled upon a very special find. The stone disc, three and a quarter metres in diameter and 30 centimetres thick, showed the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui after she had been killed by her brother, Huitzilopochtli, the god of sun and war. The image of the naked, dismembered and decapitated goddess must have originally been situated in the Templo Mayor, the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán, the exact location of which had been lost to the mists of time.

That the Templo Mayor was missing in action was not an unusual occurrence in Mexican archaeology. Unlike other great empires of history, such as those belonging to Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Aztec Empire was poorly served in terms of archaeology. Relatively few archaeological sites were known outside the capital city, mainly due to the indirect nature of Aztec control, which did not lead to large-scale material investment in the provinces. In Tenochtitlán itself, Aztec buildings were quickly destroyed when the Spanish conquistadors took over the city and built their new colonial base, Mexico City, on top.

In 2017, a sacrificial wolf was found buried with gold ornaments and chest plates, sea shells, and even flint knives

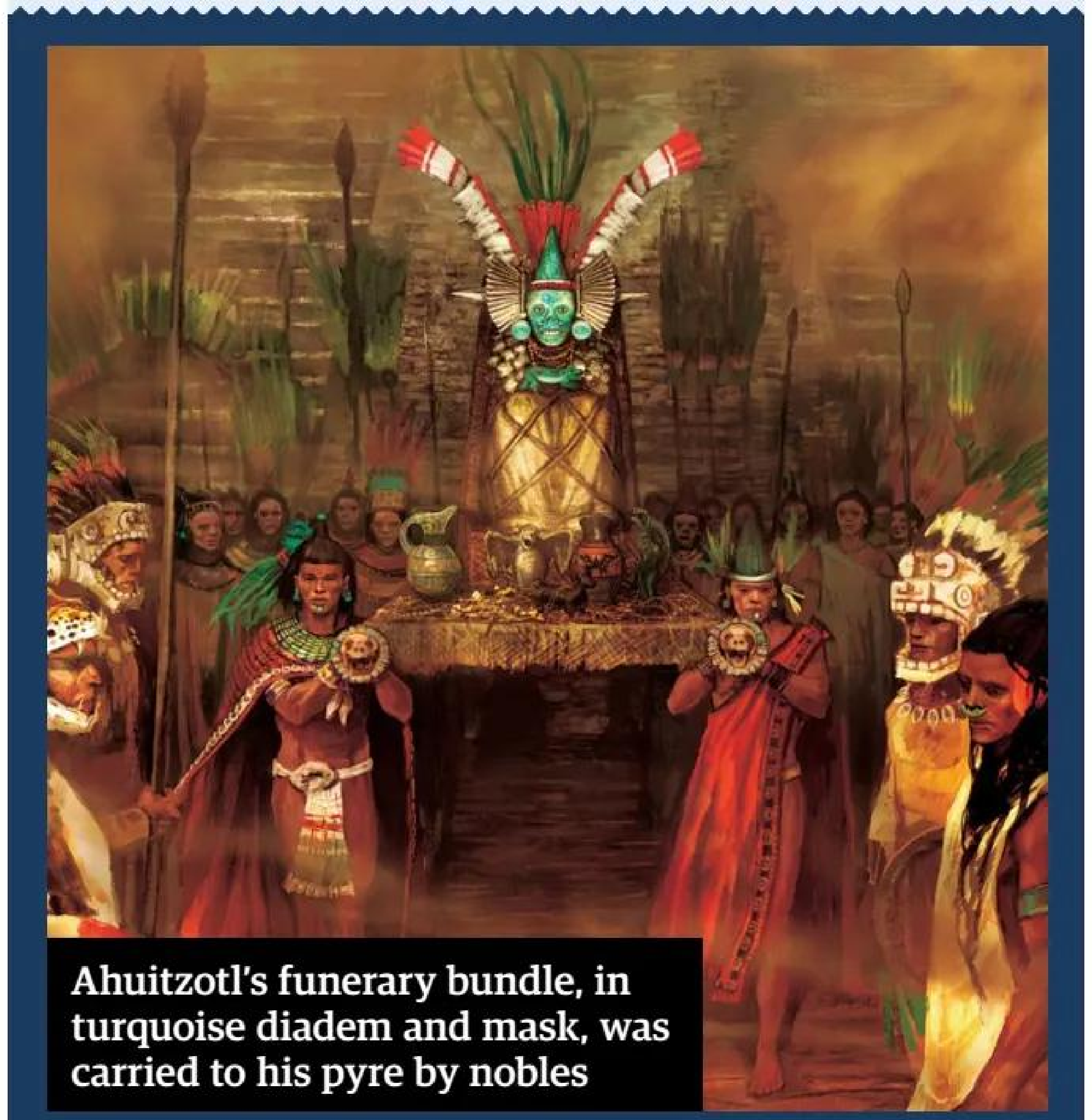
It was known that the Templo Mayor was somewhere in the area that the stone disc of Coyolxauhqui had been found - a number of small-scale excavations in the first half of the 20th century had uncovered some buildings and artefacts of a ritual nature - but at that time there was little desire to dig up what had become an affluent residential district of Mexico City. However, the Coyolxauhqui disc captured public attention like no previous find had done, and the authorities finally decided to act. For the next four years, archaeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma was allowed to dismantle 13 buildings, themselves of historical interest with features dating from the Spanish colonial era, in order to access the Aztec remains. The initial findings were promising. The level of preservation was good, with more than 7,000 objects pulled from the soil. Many of these had an undoubtedly sacred function: animal skeletons, effigies and figurines of the gods, and decorated stone knives.

Historians already knew about the Templo Mayor - a dual temple atop a stone, square, step pyramid - from Spanish writings. Two stairways provided access to the two temples, one of which was dedicated to Tlaloc, the god of water and rain, and the other to Huitzilopochtli, the god of war and the sun. Usually only priests and sacrificial victims would be allowed up the stairs to the temples, but Emperor Moctezuma II had invited Hernán Cortés to climb the steps to better view the city before the relationship between the two leaders descended into the short conflict that would destroy the Aztec Empire. Spanish chroniclers, though in awe of the magnificence of the Templo Mayor, were shocked by bloodstains on the floor and the acrid stench of hearts burning on sacred braziers.

What the Spanish did not know or write about, however, was the long history of the Templo Mayor. The archaeological excavations of Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (a name that suggests he may be descended from the imperial line himself) revealed that the grand temple that Cortés climbed was actually the seventh incarnation on the site. Underneath it were six prior versions, each of which was altered, improved and built upon by successive emperors.

The modern-day archaeologists uncovered evidence from every version of the Templo Mayor except the first. That initial wooden construction, begun soon after Tenochtitlán's founding in 1325, has sunk into the water table and any remnants have likely rotted away. However, the successor temples can be plotted through a jigsaw of leftover stone buildings and sculptures. Among the prize finds was a téchcatl, the stone upon which a sacrificial victim was laid in order to remove their heart. It dated to the time of the second temple, constructed over 50 years in the reigns of Acamapichtli, Huitzilihuitl and Chimalpopoca. The Coyolxauhqui disc that stimulated the excavations to begin dated to the fourth temple, while finds from the sixth temple, built during the reign of Ahuizotl, included carvings commemorating the opening of the temple and gave the exact date of the ceremony – 19 December 1487.

Although the excavation of the Templo Mayor that directly resulted from the Coyolxauhqui disc took place between 1978 and 1982, further investigations continue. In 2009, archaeologists began to dig up Plaza Manuel Gamio (fittingly named after an early-20th-century Mexican archaeologist who excavated the Aztec city of



Ahuitzotl's funerary bundle, in turquoise diadem and mask, was carried to his pyre by nobles

The emperor and the ashes

Will the mortal remains of Emperor Ahuitzotl ever be found?

British archaeologists were stunned when they discovered the body of King Richard III in 2012. Six years earlier, Mexican archaeologists thought they may have had their own king-in-the-car-park moment. Aztec emperors were publicly cremated on a platform called a cuauhxicalco, then placed in a ceramic urn and buried. Surrounding the area were trees decorated with colourful paper. Archaeologists think they have uncovered the cuauhxicalco in the form of a 12-metre circular platform decorated with stone serpent heads. Nearby, a withered trunk of an oak tree that grew in a large flowerpot was also found.

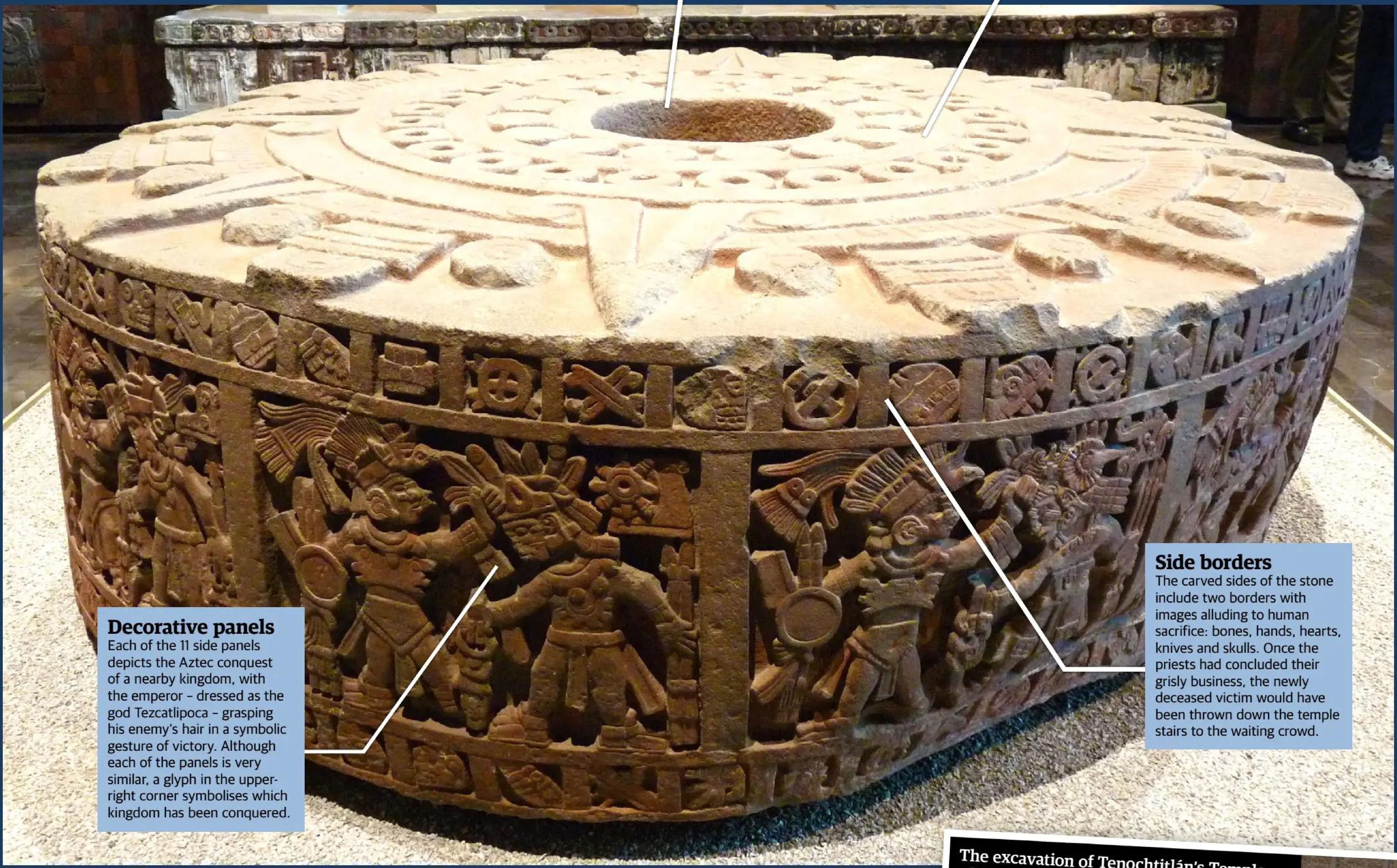
In 2006, archaeologists working in the Templo Mayor found a stone inscribed with the Aztec date 10 Rabbit, corresponding to 1502, along with burial objects that suggested the interment belonged to an important person. Could this be the spot where Ahuitzotl, the eighth Aztec Emperor who more than doubled the Empire's lands and died in 1502, was buried? Nothing further was found, leading some to reluctantly conclude that Ahuitzotl's urn was actually dug up in 1900 by early Mexican archaeologist Leopoldo Batres, who was unaware that he was excavating the Templo Mayor and that he may have exhumed one of the greatest Aztec leaders.

However, the area that Batres excavated had long been thought of as a place of ill omens by the few modern Mexicans who'd chosen to build their houses there. Was this a hangover from the site's eerie past as a burial place of royalty?

The discovery of the Coyolxauhqui disc in 1978 spurred new excavations of the Templo Mayor and a new era in Aztec archaeology

Stone of Moctezuma

Discovered during excavation of the Templo Mayor in July 1988, this giant stone was carved during the reign of Moctezuma I, the fifth king of Tenochtitlán



Basin
The circular basin in the centre contains a carving of the sun god Tonatiuh, out of whose mouth stuck a tongue in the shape of a knife (now broken off). Sacrificial victims would have been tied to the protruding tongue, suggesting that it was originally located outside one of the temples of the Templo Mayor complex.

Carved design
The upper face of the stone, just over 3.6 metres in diameter, has a circular design reminiscent of the sun. Carved arrows point to the outer edge, alongside pictures of cuauhxicalli, the stone receptacles used to house human hearts after sacrifice. The inner stone face has small circles arranged in larger concentric circles.

Decorative panels
Each of the 11 side panels depicts the Aztec conquest of a nearby kingdom, with the emperor – dressed as the god Tezcatlipoca – grasping his enemy's hair in a symbolic gesture of victory. Although each of the panels is very similar, a glyph in the upper-right corner symbolises which kingdom has been conquered.

Side borders
The carved sides of the stone include two borders with images alluding to human sacrifice: bones, hands, hearts, knives and skulls. Once the priests had concluded their grisly business, the newly deceased victim would have been thrown down the temple stairs to the waiting crowd.

Teotihuacán) adjoining the Metropolitan Cathedral. Here they discovered grisly artefacts used in the business of sacrifice. A cache of 47 clay incense pots known as sahumadores were meticulously positioned and showed signs of regular use. Aztec priests were thought to pack the pots with sweet-smelling incense to disguise the rancid smell of death that pervaded the temples during the sacrificial rites. Nearby, they also uncovered a statuette of a woman made from one such incense – copal, an aromatic tree resin – and half a millennia later the statuette still gives off a sweet, eucalyptus-like aroma.

If the Spanish tales of human sacrifice were ever in doubt, they were laid to rest when the archaeologists investigating Plaza Manuel Gamio uncovered a number of human burials. More than 650 skulls were uncovered, most with holes above their ears that were bored after death, with trace organic remnants suggesting that they had been decorated with cactus thorns, cornflowers and cotton blossoms. These skulls were probably

> "Aztec priests packed pots with sweet-smelling incense to disguise the rancid smell of death during sacrificial rites"

The excavation of Tenochtitlán's Temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl and ball court was squeezed in between city-centre buildings

CALENDARIO AZTECA O PIEDRA DEL SOL.

The Sun Stone can now be viewed in Mexico City's National Anthropology Museum, amongst numerous other Aztec artefacts

The Sun Stone

Another stunning stone was found more than two centuries before the Coyolxauhqui disc

Perhaps the first ever Aztec archaeological find occurred on 17 December 1790, when a 21-tonne stone block was found buried under the Zócalo, Mexico City's main square, but its significance was initially overlooked by Mexico's early archaeologists. More than three and a half metres across and almost one metre thick, the stone depicts Tonatiuh, the sun god, surrounded by a series of ornate circular carvings. The exact function of the Sun Stone has been deliberated ever since it was found. Was it a calendar, as 19th-century antiquarians believed? Was it a ritual altar, as most modern archaeologists think? Or was it a piece of political propaganda, designed to show Tenochtitlán as the centre of the world?

The Sun Stone survived the Spanish conquest for a few decades until Archbishop Alonso de Montúfar ordered it buried in an attempt to purge the new city of its pagan past. It was rediscovered more than two centuries later, when a new plaza was cleared, and hung on the outside of the Metropolitan Cathedral – quite ironic considering it was a churchman who originally ordered its burial. However, the historians and early archaeologists who studied the Sun Stone did not realise that an object of such importance would originally have been housed in the Templo Mayor. Not for a further 200 years would the location of the grand Aztec temple be rediscovered.

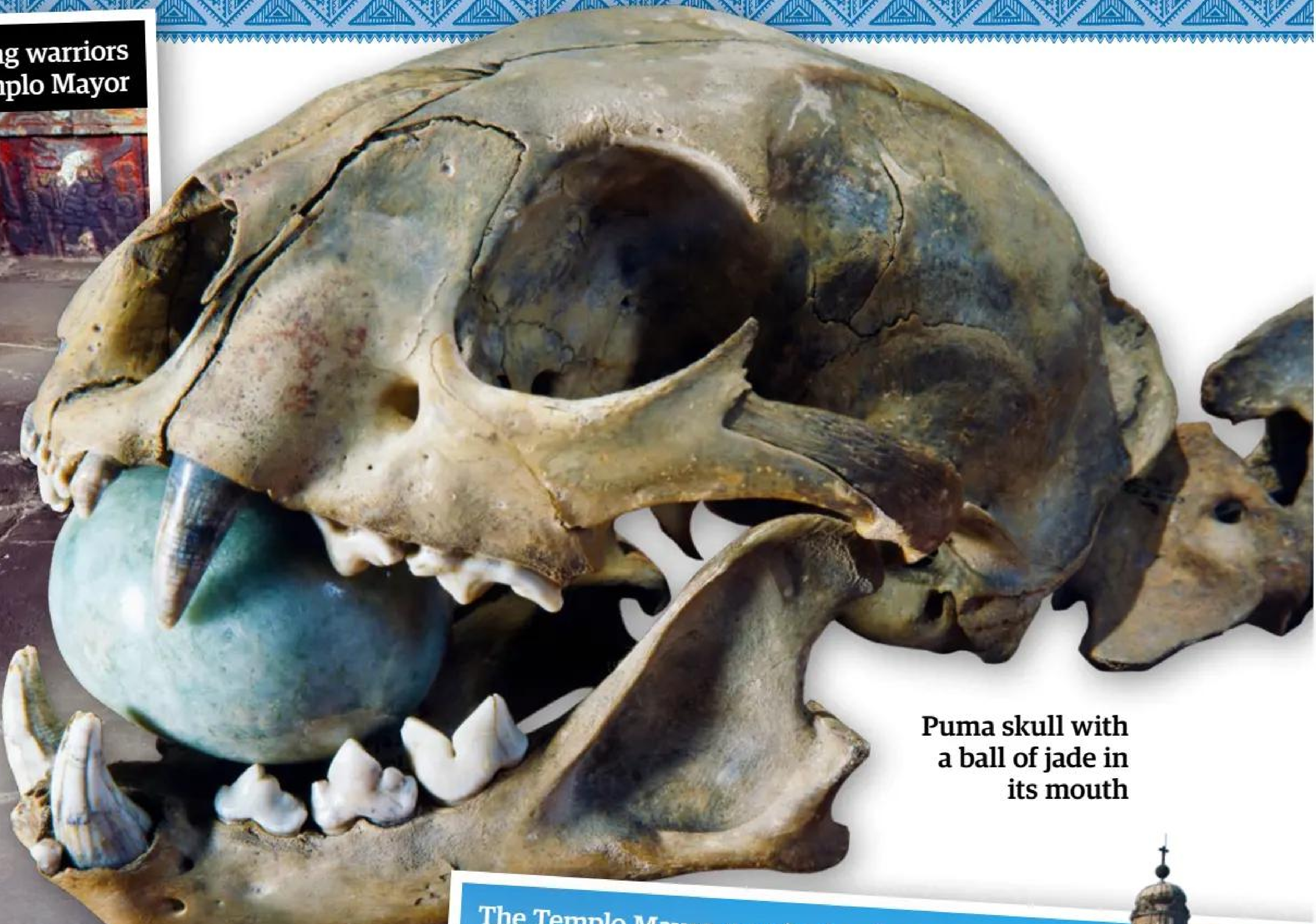
displayed in a tzompantli, or skull banner – a large rack, 35 metres long and five metres high, which could hold thousands of skulls on wooden poles through the man-made holes. In front of the skull rack were two large stone pillars, six metres in diameter, into which skulls that had been removed from the rack were plastered. The gruesome sight was first described by conquistador Andres de Tapia and was originally thought by historians to have been built from the heads of defeated warriors who fought the Aztecs.

However, historians have been forced to reconsider their theories after discovering the results of laboratory analysis. Only three-quarters of the skulls examined belonged to men; a puzzling 20% were women, while 5% belonged to children. Isotopic analysis suggests that, whilst they were born away from Tenochtitlán – most in southern Mexico – many spent a considerable amount of time in the capital city before they died. Were these actually the skulls of captured warriors, as the Spanish thought? Or could they have been slaves, or unfortunate migrants chosen to be sacrificial victims?

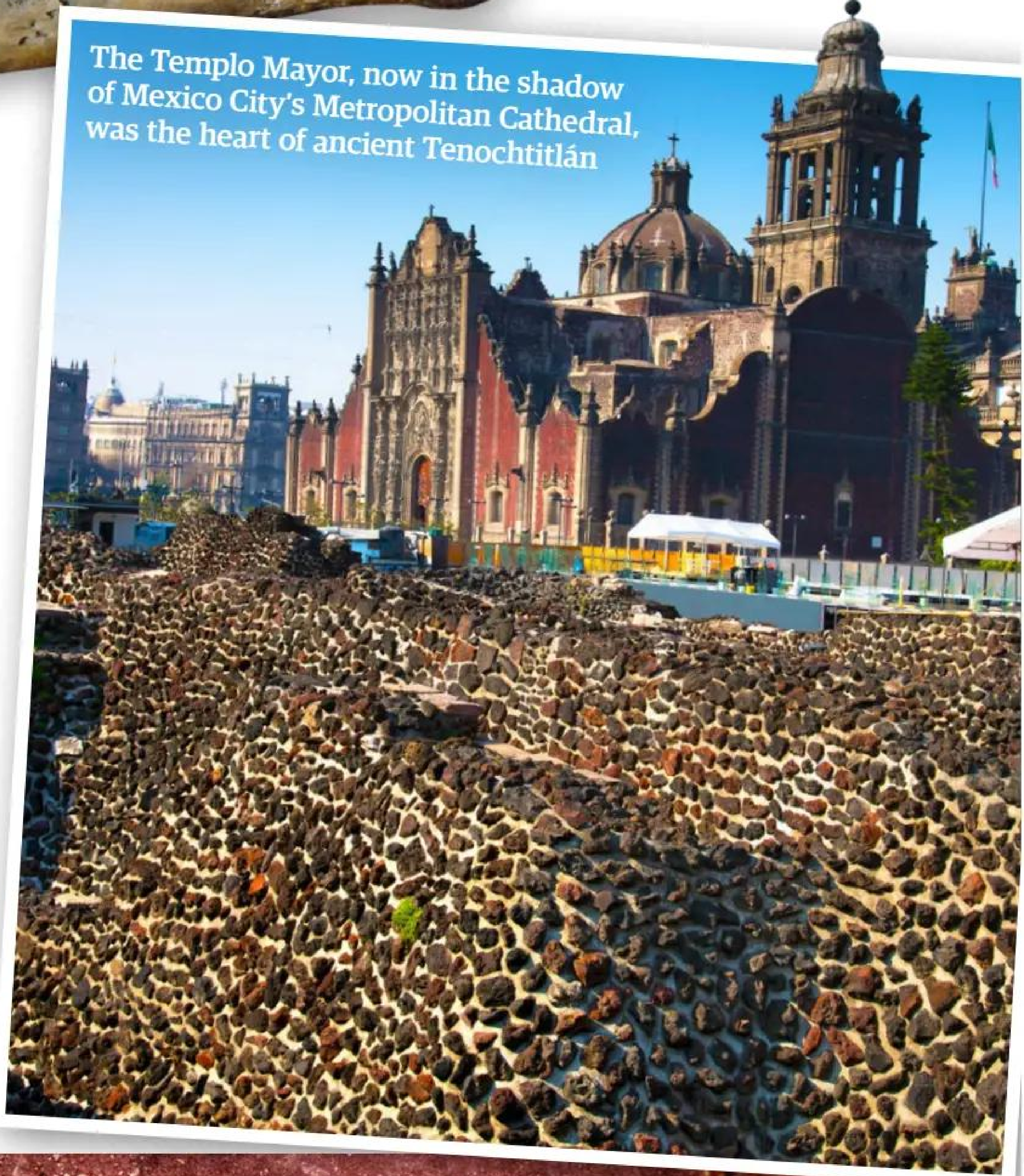
Two particular child burials in the grounds of the Templo Mayor have also focused the archaeologists' thoughts on the reasons behind sacrificial rites. The first, discovered in 2005, was the burial of a five-year-old boy dated to around 1450. Skeletal evidence showed that his heart had been removed and he was interred with grave goods including jewellery and the wings of a forest hawk. The second burial, uncovered in 2017, bore striking similarities – the boy, approximately nine years old, was carefully buried in a tomb with a ring-shaped wooden breastplate, a mask, jewellery and the

> "More than 650 skulls were uncovered, most with holes bored above their ears where they'd been decorated with cornflowers"

Stone seat with polychrome reliefs depicting warriors at the House of the Eagles, Templo Mayor



Puma skull with a ball of jade in its mouth



The Templo Mayor, now in the shadow of Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral, was the heart of ancient Tenochtitlán

wings of a forest hawk. This child died sometime around 1490.

The hawk wings were a symbolic offering that linked both burials to the god Huitzilopochtli, who was often depicted as a feathered figure. The careful inhumation of their whole bodies, unlike the dismemberment of most sacrificial victims, suggested that these boys had a specific and unusual function. Were they sacrificed to mark the closure or opening of a particular phase of the Templo Mayor, or were they killed to mark a different auspicious event?

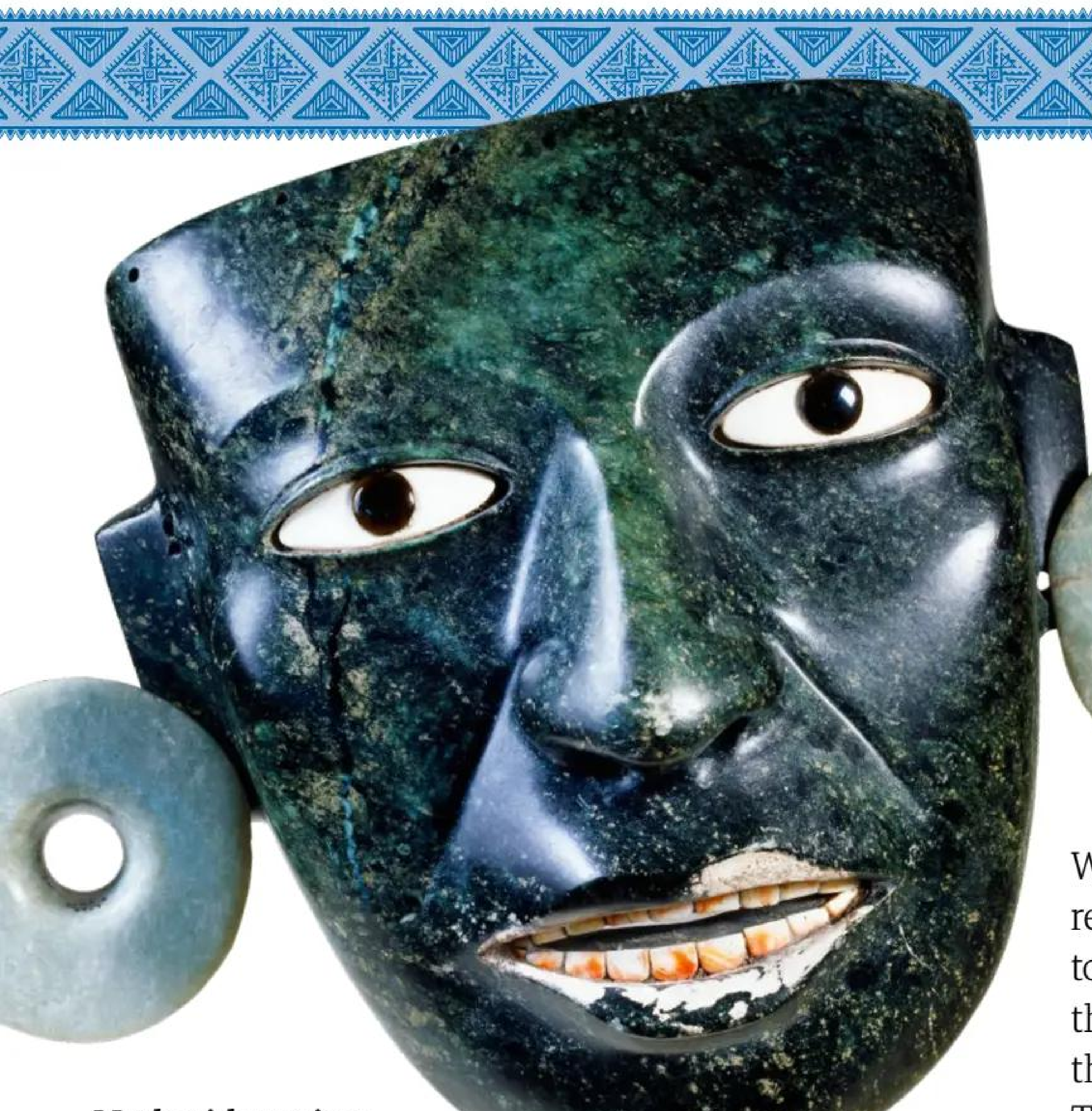
The writings of the Spanish conquerors inevitably focused on the macabre deeds that took place in the Aztec temples, but the ritual complex in the heart of the city contained far more than just the Templo Mayor itself. One structure that vied with the great temple for sheer size was the Calmecac, a school for the Aztec elite to the side of the Templo Mayor. It was discovered by chance when workers demolished a building damaged by the devastating earthquake that struck Mexico City in 1985.

Excavation of the Calmecac revealed eight-foot high snail-spiral ornaments associated with the rain god Tlaloc that once stood on the roof the building and would have been viewable across the city. Spanish drawings had described small, decorative ornaments like these, but the conquistadors probably saw (and destroyed) a later version of the sculptures – the archaeologists found the bigger sculptures buried underneath a floor. At the other end of the scale, small artefacts give a glimpse of everyday life in the school: ceramic plates, cutlery and knives. On the wide staircases, the footprints of the priests-in-training who once ate from the plates are preserved in the stucco plaster.

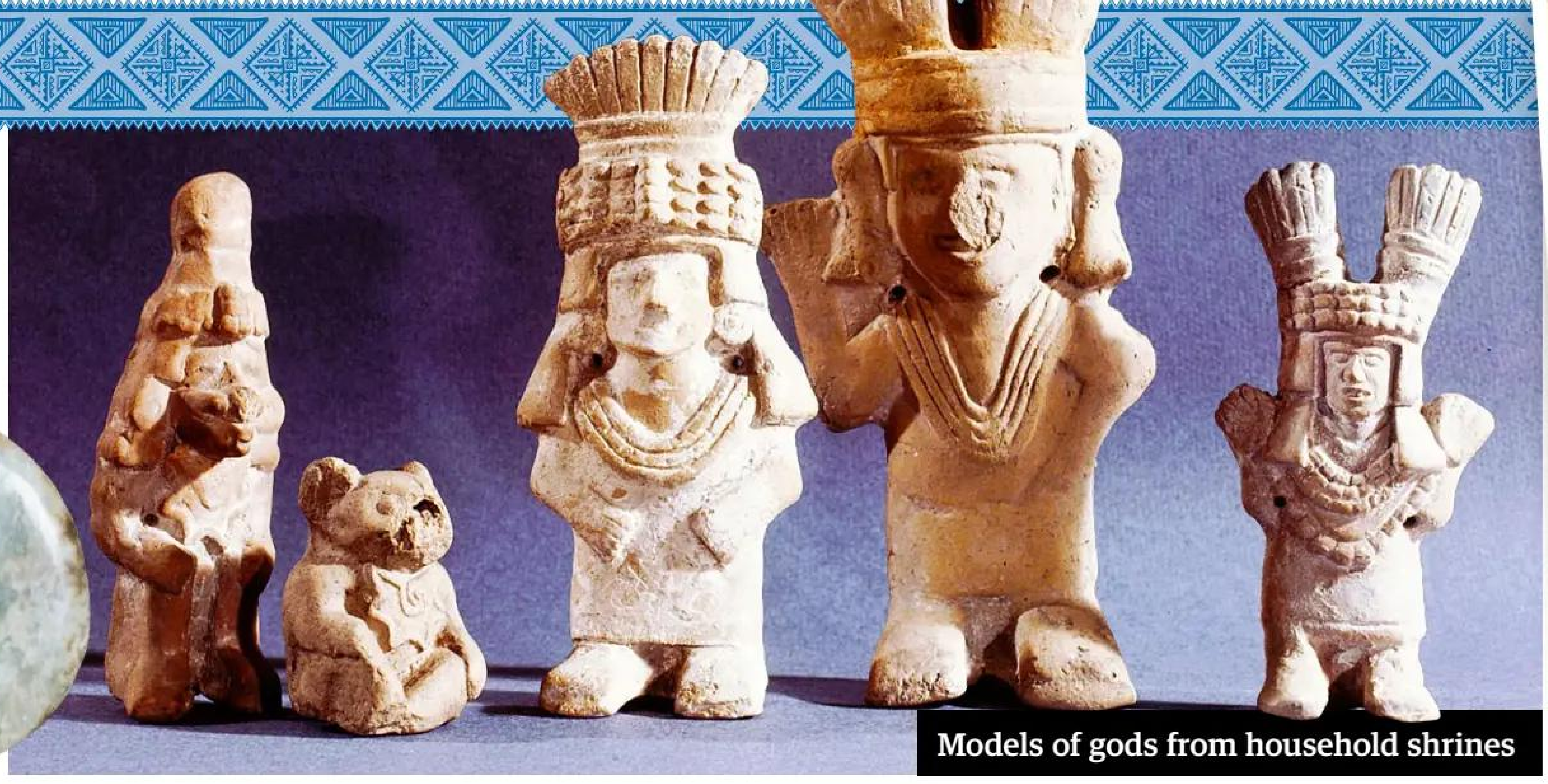
Across the road from the Calmecac are more buildings and structures excavated by archaeologists in recent years. One dig has uncovered a nine-metre section of a ball court, used by Aztecs to play a sport that some uninspired historians have named 'the Mesoamerican ball game'. Although the rules of the game are not known, it seems likely that teams battled within the stone walls of the court to prevent a rubber ball from bouncing, possibly using their hips as the main method to strike the ball. Spanish descriptions suggest that points could be scored if the ball hit the opposite team's end wall, while an automatic victory was earned if a team managed to put a ball through a stone ring. The Tenochtitlán ball court supports what has already

> An earthquake in 2018 revealed the remains of a small temple inside Teopanzolco pyramid, just outside Mexico City

Recent excavations in Tenochtitlán are shedding new light on human sacrifice in the Aztec capital



Mask with earrings from Teotihuacán, Mexico. Aztec civilisation, 14th-16th century



Models of gods from household shrines

been found in other ball courts across Central America. However, this particular court added to the modern understanding of the game when archaeologists uncovered a pile of 32 severed male neck vertebrae by a stairway just off the court. It showed that, even in the realm of leisure, human sacrifice seems to have played a role. These victims were likely sacrificed, perhaps decapitated, as part of the rituals and traditions that surrounded the mysterious game.

Only a small section of Tenochtitlán's ball court could be excavated, a problem typical of that faced by archaeologists digging in modern Mexico City. The entire footprint of ancient Tenochtitlán has been the site of centuries of subsequent building, demolition and rebuilding. Mexico City is the most populous metropolitan area in the Western Hemisphere, with nearly nine million people in the city itself and more than double that in the wider metropolitan area. The heart of Tenochtitlán is also the historic heart of the successor city, with colonial and revolutionary history vying for space with that of the Aztecs.

The Metropolitan Cathedral, seat of the Catholic Archdiocese of Mexico and initially constructed with stone robbed from the Templo Mayor, is never going to be pulled down so archaeologists can investigate what is underneath it. However, they have been able to dig trenches in parts of the adjoining Plaza Manuel Gamio and Plaza de Constitución, or Zócalo. Whenever a nearby building is redeveloped or rebuilt, archaeologists can access the foundations to ensure that nothing escapes their careful gaze.

The excavation that uncovered the ball court close to the Templo Mayor is one such example. When a 1950s hotel was pulled down to be redeveloped, archaeologists were given the chance to take a peek at a narrow corridor of land that they had not seen before. Alongside the ball court, the excavation exposed part of the 36-metre Temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, god of wind and wisdom. It was revealed to be a distinctive, round shape; matching the description of Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún, and the outer wall corresponds exactly to the modern street plan above. However, the Spanish documents were shown to be incorrect in one important regard – they had the Temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl located 25 metres to the north.

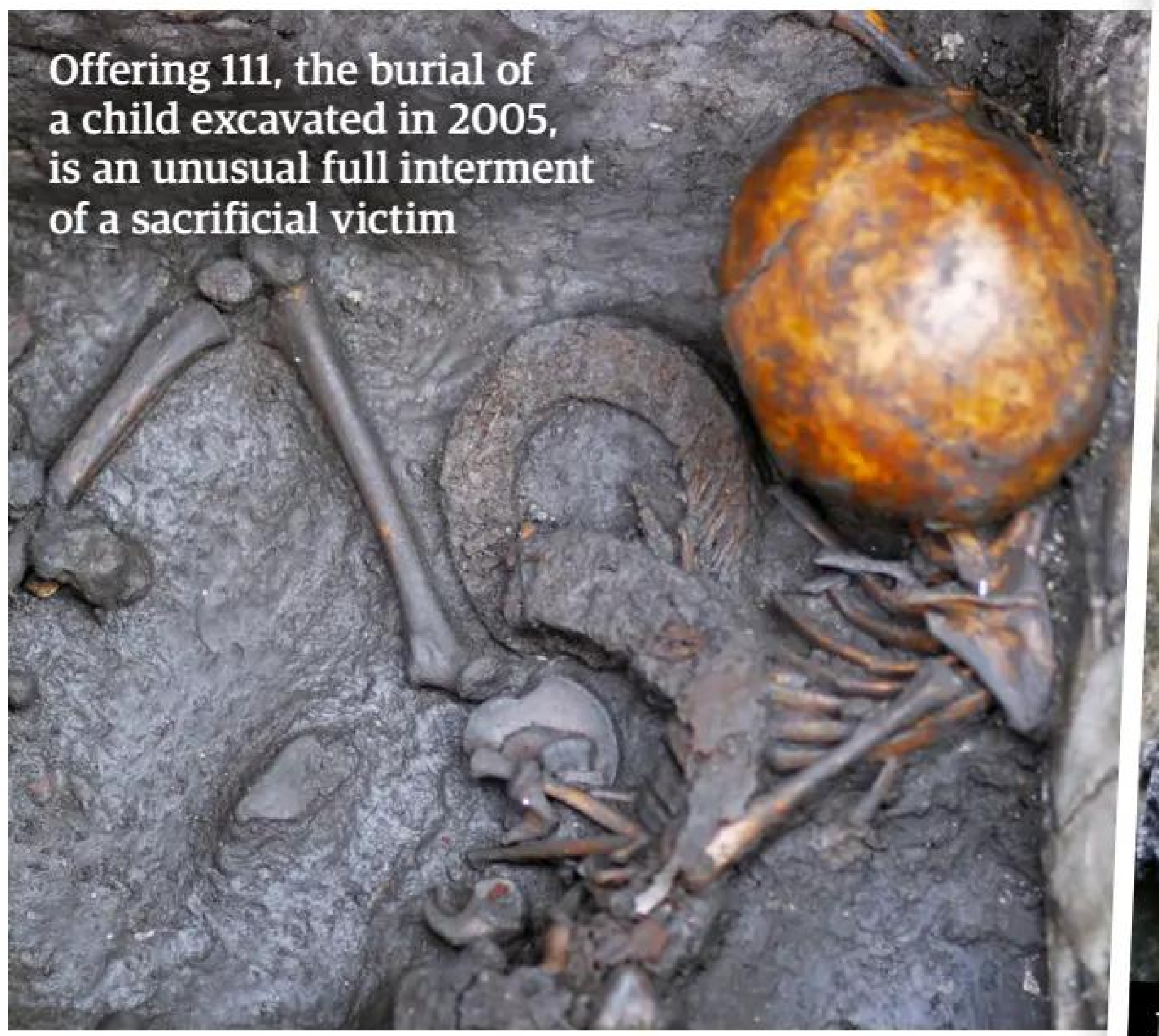
Though it's thought around 500 Aztec codices (pictoral books) were made, only about 20 have survived

Archaeological excavation of Aztec remains in Mexico City has not been confined to the Templo Mayor complex. A couple of miles to the north, a second Temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl has been unearthed in the Tlatelolco neighbourhood. Once a second city-state set up by dissidents 13 years after the foundation of Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco grew alongside her bigger neighbour and eventually merged under Tenochtitlán control in 1473.

By then, Tlatelolco's residents had built their own Temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl with a similar circular floorplan to the nearby Tenochtitlán temple. The unusual shape was built to resemble a coiled snake, since the god took the form of a feathered serpent, with priests entering though a doorway made to look like the snake's fanged mouth. The archaeologists were also able to uncover the 11-metre-wide temple platform with white stucco plaster and offerings of bird bones, obsidian, cactus spines and ceramic figurines of monkeys and duck bills.

The temple was uncovered after a supermarket was demolished in 2014 in advance of a larger shopping mall being constructed. However, Tlatelolco had long been known as an important archaeological resource before the Temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl was found. The Plaza de las Tres Culturas – so-called because Aztec, colonial and Mexican buildings stand side by side – allows visitors to admire more than 60 Aztec structures, including altars, platforms and temples.

Yet archaeologists still have plenty left to do. Excavations at the base of the Spanish colonial Church of Santiago in 2002 discovered that it had been erected over Aztec foundations, just as Tenochtitlán's Templo Mayor was buried underneath the Metropolitan Cathedral. However, the ruins underneath the church were not



Offering 111, the burial of a child excavated in 2005, is an unusual full interment of a sacrificial victim

Detail of the stone tzompantli, or skull rack, found in the excavations of the Templo Mayor

The 49 skeletons found at Tlatelolco in 2009 raise questions as to why these Aztecs were buried together

Peeling back the layers of history is a slow process that requires a careful eye and hand

a place of Aztec worship - it was a simple, raised box structure. Two metres deep and eight metres across, the stone basin was a caja de agua, or water box. Water was fed into the basin via aqueducts from Chapultepec Hill, some four miles away. Although Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco were surrounded by Lake Texcoco, the lake water was not suitable for consumption, so the water box provided a reservoir of drinking water from which residents could fill pots and take it away.

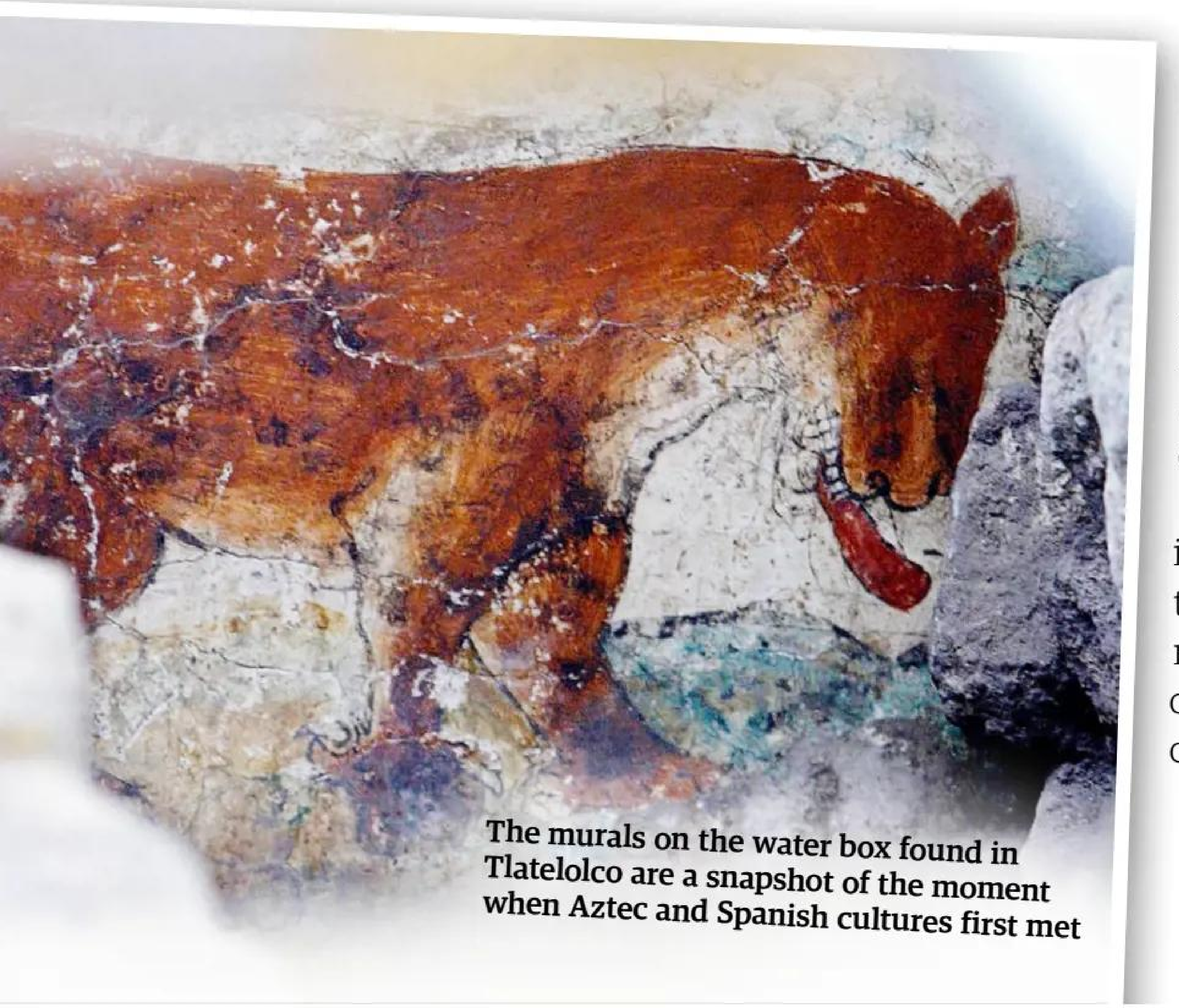
Given its importance to the inhabitants of the city, the water box was decorated with brightly coloured murals, the faded remnants of which the archaeologists have been able to record and preserve. The fusion of Aztec and Spanish styles is a snapshot of Central American history. Among the depictions are canoes, fishermen, ducks, reeds, water lilies, herons and jaguars. In one particular image, a coiled snake tries to eat a frog. Snakes and frogs were regarded as important animals in the Aztec belief system, but both animals were drawn in a naturalistic manner more common in European art. Essentially, the water box murals capture the moment when the Aztec and Spanish cultures first came into contact with each other, during the precious little time between the arrival of Cortés and the end of Aztec Tenochtitlán.

The water box has been dated to the reign of the final emperor, Cuauhtémoc, and may represent the final act of Aztec civil engineering before the Empire's collapse. Cuauhtémoc took control of Tenochtitlán in 1520 after the 80-day reign of Cuitláhuac, whose short rule may have come to an end after contracting smallpox from the Spanish newcomers. Recognising that defending the heart of Tenochtitlán was impossible, Cuauhtémoc fled to Tlatelolco and put up a brief fight before being captured when attempting to flee once again. Cuauhtémoc was brought before Hernán Cortés and allowed to remain on the throne as a puppet ruler, but not before he was tortured in the hope that he might reveal hidden stashes of Aztec gold. Four years later, Cuauhtémoc was executed after Cortés suspected him of plotting an assassination attempt.

The final emperor's fate at the hands of the Spanish does not appear to be unusual. In 2009, archaeologists searching for a palace complex in Tlatelolco were surprised when they uncovered 49 skeletons in a mass burial. Most of the skeletons - 45 in total - belonged to young males of fighting age. Of the others, two were children, one was a teenager and one was an older male wearing a ring that might denote he was of higher status. Was this a war grave, filled with those who had fought for Cuauhtémoc against the Spanish invaders? That seemed unlikely since several of the skeletons had evidence of wounds which had healed. They were also carefully buried, laid out in neat lines on their backs, arms crossed and wrapped in maguey leaves.

The archaeologists' current theory is that these unfortunate Aztecs were prisoners of war who were captured in the battles around Tlatelolco and used as a labour force to deconstruct the Aztec temples and build the colonial city that replaced them. The mass burial was likely ordered by the Spanish overlords but carried out by the locals since the graves included typically Aztec burial goods like copper necklaces and bone buttons. Perhaps, like Cuitláhuac, the 49 mysterious dead fell victim to European diseases to which they had no resistance; or perhaps they suffered a similar fate to Cuauhtémoc, and were executed once they were no longer useful.

Archaeologists will continue to excavate in Mexico City in an attempt to answer these and the many other questions that remain, continuing the recent golden age of Aztec archaeology and uncovering more of the capital city's past.



The murals on the water box found in Tlatelolco are a snapshot of the moment when Aztec and Spanish cultures first met

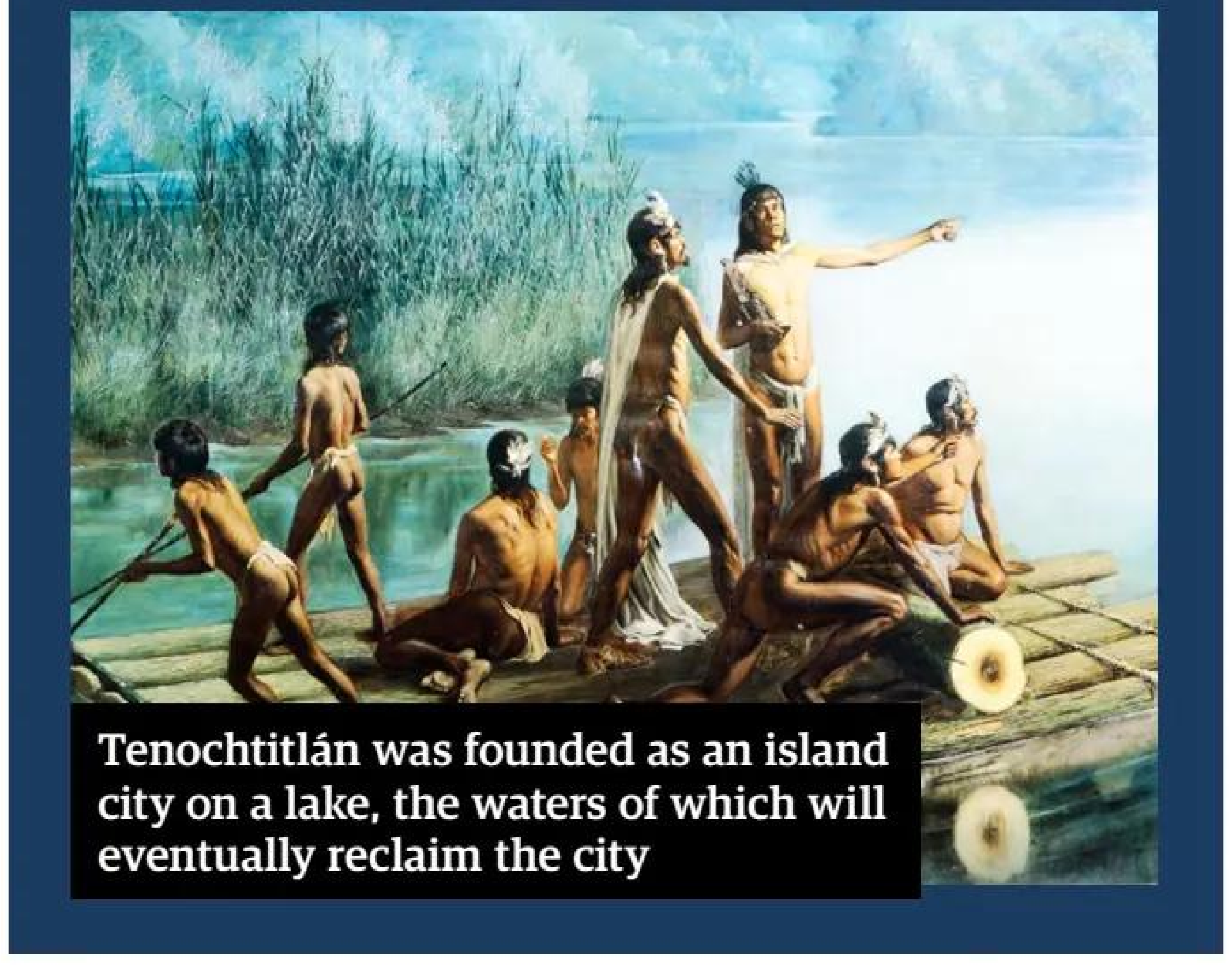
Analysis of the skulls found near the Templo Mayor skull racks revealed that a quarter were from women and children

The Aztec Atlantis

The watery problems encountered in the excavation of an island city

The archaeologists investigating the Aztec capital must not only peel away the layers of history, they must also battle Tenochtitlán's unusual geography. The city was built on a group of marshy islands in Lake Texcoco, with land reclaimed from the water using layers of tree trunks and soil - an ancient technique similar to that employed at the same time by civic engineers halfway around the world, in Venice. Archaeologists have also found traces of the canals that criss-crossed the Aztec city, as well as a pier that jutted into the lake.

However, water gradually seeped into the foundations. For the past 500 years, the ruins of Tenochtitlán have been sinking into the waterlogged soil at a rate of a metre per year. Archaeologists must constantly pump water from their trenches and scrape away wet soil that sticks to their trowels like glue. The only place that does not suffer from the ravages of the lake is the Templo Mayor, which was built on a sturdy island, and is sinking at a far slower rate. When Hernán Cortés visited Tenochtitlán as a guest of Moctezuma II in November 1519, the Templo Mayor rose 150 feet above the city. If the current rate of sinking around it continues, it will eventually stand that high above the city once again.



Tenochtitlán was founded as an island city on a lake, the waters of which will eventually reclaim the city

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Inside Templo Mayor

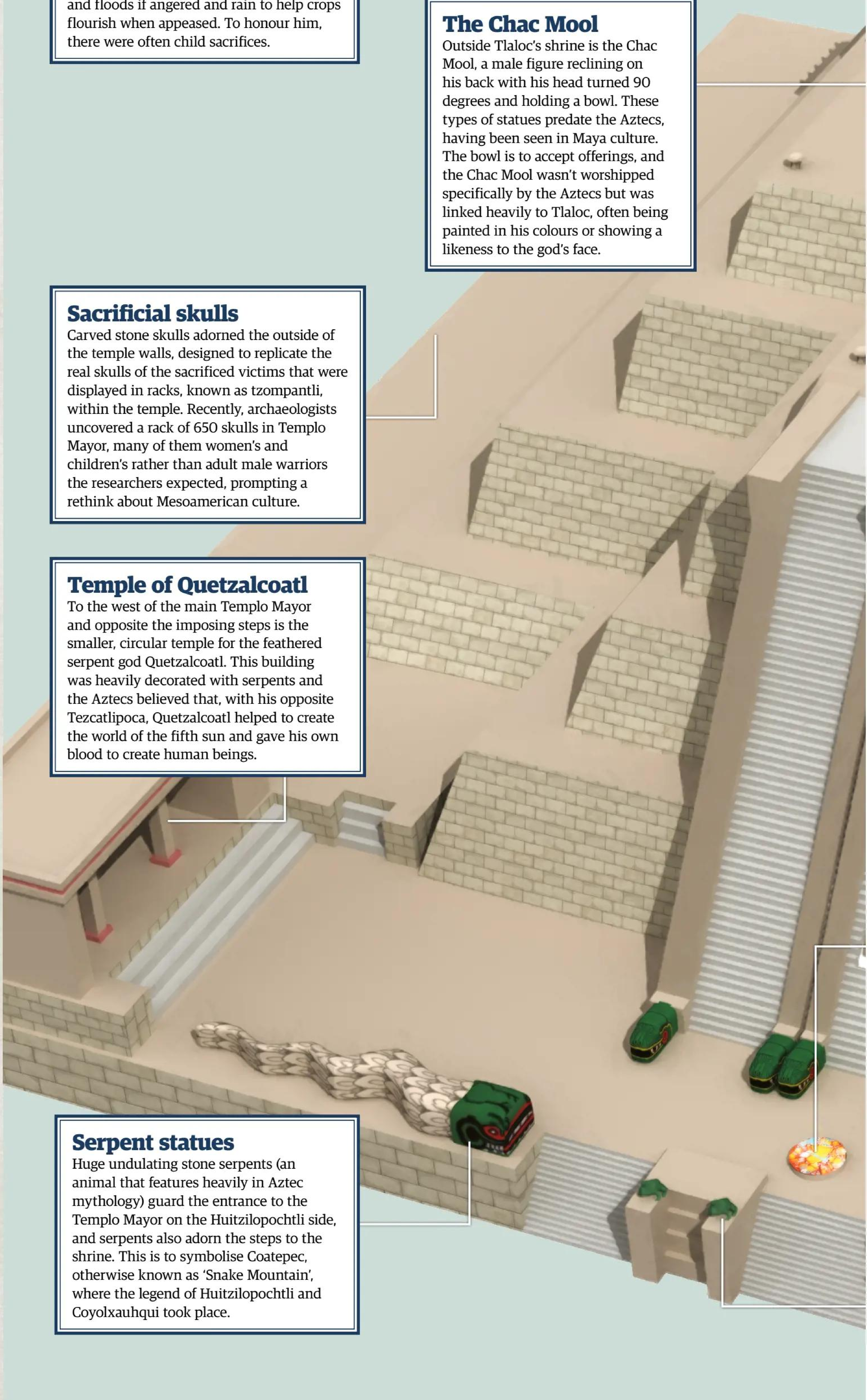
THE GREAT AZTEC PYRAMID AT TENOCHTITLÁN, 1497

Templo Mayor is the Spanish name for Hueyi Teocalli, the almighty pyramid temple that dominated the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, where Mexico City stands today. It was originally built as simple shrines to the fierce Aztec deities of war and of rain – Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, respectively – in 1325 on a swampy island in Lake Toxcoco. But before the Aztec Empire fell in 1521, the temple was rebuilt no less than six times.

Each Aztec ruler added a new outermost layer to the temple out of respect to the gods and to ensure that his reign would be immortalised within the great stone structure. As they added layers to the temple, the Aztecs buried sacrificial deposits between the stones. So far, archaeologists have uncovered 6,000 objects hidden between the layers. The sixth and final rebuild took place in 1487, bringing the temple to a massive 60 metres (180 feet) tall, a stone behemoth on the skyline of Tenochtitlán and both the spiritual and physical heart of the Aztec Empire.

Covered in stucco and painted vibrant colours, stone reliefs depicting the stories of the Aztec pantheon adorned the temple, along with detailed carvings of animals and numerous statues. The huge staircases leading up to the shrines were purposely steep to ensure that the bodies flung from the sacrificial stone at the top would reach the bottom. These sacrifices were frequent enough that the bright white steps up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli were stained red with blood. While the great temple also housed several shrines to individual gods, it also stood in a precinct of approximately 78 other sacred buildings.

Once Tenochtitlán fell to the siege led by Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, some of the stones from the great temple were used to build the Christian cathedrals of Mexico City. However, thanks to the constant layering-up of the temple, some of the original ruins still remain today.



Shrine to Tlaloc
The north side of the two shrines at the top of the great temple is for Tlaloc, the god of rain and fertility. This god was feared and revered as he was believed to send thunder and floods if angered and rain to help crops flourish when appeased. To honour him, there were often child sacrifices.

The Chac Mool
Outside Tlaloc's shrine is the Chac Mool, a male figure reclining on his back with his head turned 90 degrees and holding a bowl. These types of statues predate the Aztecs, having been seen in Maya culture. The bowl is to accept offerings, and the Chac Mool wasn't worshipped specifically by the Aztecs but was linked heavily to Tlaloc, often being painted in his colours or showing a likeness to the god's face.

Sacrificial skulls
Carved stone skulls adorned the outside of the temple walls, designed to replicate the real skulls of the sacrificed victims that were displayed in racks, known as tzompantli, within the temple. Recently, archaeologists uncovered a rack of 650 skulls in Templo Mayor, many of them women's and children's rather than adult male warriors the researchers expected, prompting a rethink about Mesoamerican culture.

Temple of Quetzalcoatl
To the west of the main Templo Mayor and opposite the imposing steps is the smaller, circular temple for the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl. This building was heavily decorated with serpents and the Aztecs believed that, with his opposite Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl helped to create the world of the fifth sun and gave his own blood to create human beings.

Serpent statues
Huge undulating stone serpents (an animal that features heavily in Aztec mythology) guard the entrance to the Templo Mayor on the Huitzilopochtli side, and serpents also adorn the steps to the shrine. This is to symbolise Coatepec, otherwise known as 'Snake Mountain', where the legend of Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui took place.

Inside Templo Mayor

Shrine to Huitzilopochtli

The south side of the temple housed a shrine dedicated to the god of war, fire and the sun: Huitzilopochtli, the one that the Aztecs worshipped above all others. Often portrayed as a hummingbird or an eagle, the Aztecs believed that this sun god needed nourishment from the blood of human sacrifice.

Sacrificial stone

At the top of the temple, in front of Huitzilopochtli's shrine, sits a bloody, altar-like stone. Here the human sacrifices were performed by priests, as prisoners of war were held down and their still-beating hearts cut from their chests. The bleeding bodies were thrown down the steps to mimic the throwing of Coyolxauhqui down Snake Mountain, and they came to rest atop the stone carving of her likeness.

Coyolxauhqui Stone

Placed at the bottom of the steps leading to Huitzilopochtli's shrine, this important part of the temple depicts his sister Coyolxauhqui, goddess of the Moon, naked, decapitated and dismembered. In Aztec mythology, Huitzilopochtli turned on his sister after she attempted to kill their pregnant mother.

Altar of the frogs

At the base of the steps on Tlaloc's side of the temple are two frogs with upturned heads. Frogs croaking was thought to be an omen that Tlaloc was about to bring rain, and this side of the temple symbolises Tonacatepetl, the legendary mountain known as the 'mountain of our sustenance' from where the Aztecs believe their corn came.

Priests' chambers

The high priests of the Aztec civilisation would use these chambers to prepare for rituals and sacrifices performed at the end of every Aztec month (consisting of 20 days). Treated similarly to royalty and nobility, the priests were a revered part of society.

© Adrian Mann

An elaborate altar with food, photographs and marigolds for a Day of the Dead celebration

A candle-lit cemetery during a Dia de Muertos (Day of the Dead) festival in a cemetery on Isla Janitzio

Day of the Dead in the Lake Pátzcuaro area. Traditionally, people decorate tombs with marigolds and offerings, and spend a night next to the tomb of their deceased family member

The Aztec past in the Mexican future

The vestiges of the fallen Aztec Empire live on in Mexico today

Written by Will Lawrence

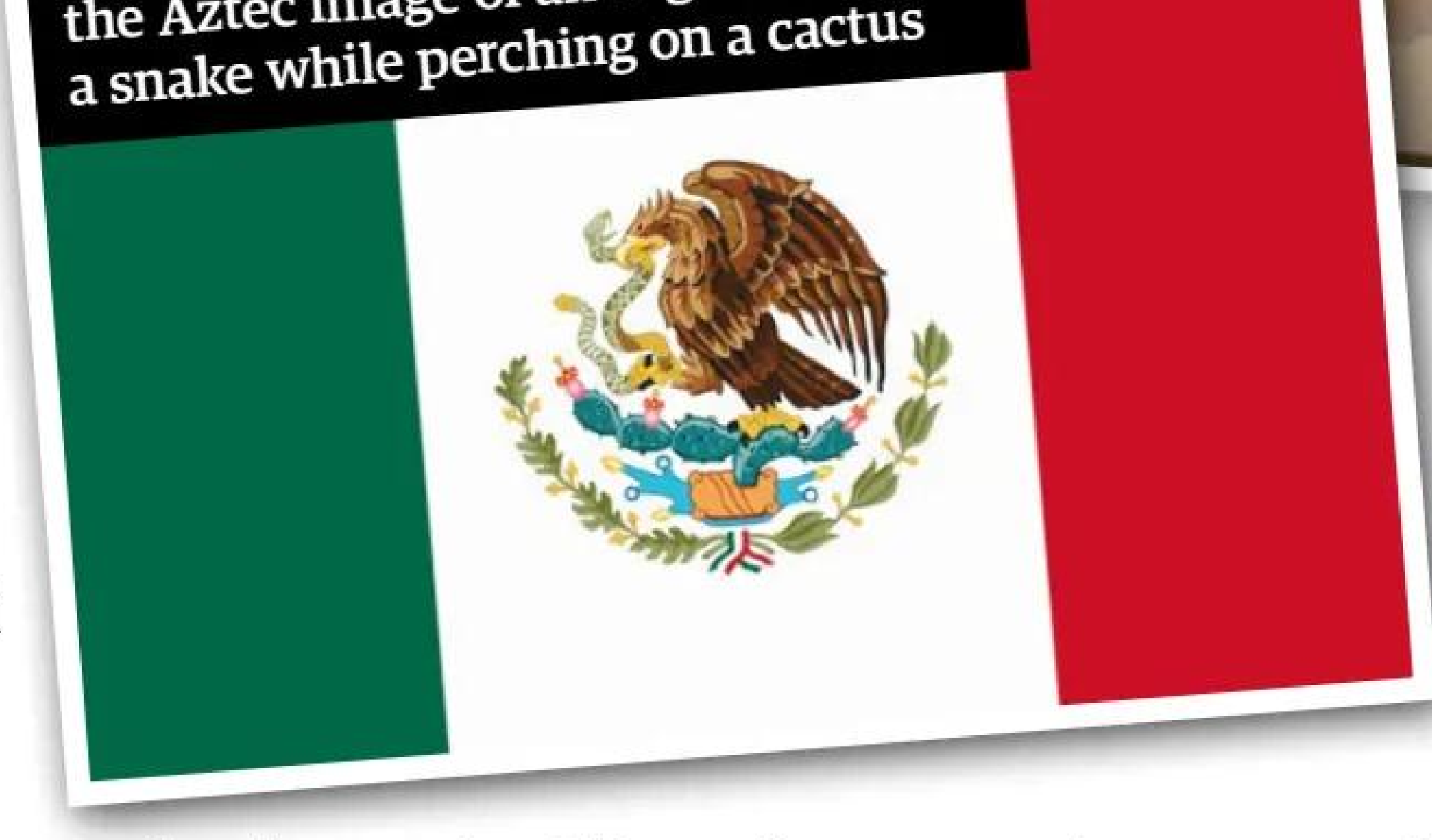
There is a story once told by Bernardino de Sahagún, the Franciscan friar, missionary priest and pioneering ethnographer who participated in the Spanish colonisation of Mexico. It may be apocryphal, a retrofitted fiction crafted by the Spaniards to facilitate their conquest, but, given the prevalence of the returning god, demi-god or king in different mythologies around the world, it carries the ring of truth. It stated that king Moctezuma II, who ruled the Aztec kingdom during the arrival of Hernán Cortés, welcomed the conquistador's appearance, recalling an indigenous belief and proclaiming the Spaniard to be an incarnation of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent deity who was destined to return and restore his hallowed kingdom of Tollan.

It is said that in Mexico today, and even among some Latinos living in the US, there are people who still hold onto this belief, hoping that one day a great Aztec deity might return in a symbolic or political context. For Aztec culture still holds a prominent place in modern Mexico, in its national identity and within the hearts of so many of those who call it home.

In 1964, the then-Mexican president dedicated a plaque at Tlatelolco, which, alongside the ancient capital of Tenochtitlán, stands as the primary archaeological site in Mexico City. It reads: "Heroically defended… Tlatelolco fell to the power of Hernán Cortés. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat but the painful birth of the Mestizo nation that is Mexico today." 'Mestizo' is a term that refers to a person of combined Spanish and Native American descent,

Pilgrims sleep near an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, an important religious figure with both Christian and pre-Christian origins

Tourists view panoramas of the cities of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City



The Mexican flag carries at its centre the Aztec image of an eagle holding a snake while perching on a cactus

and it is the foundation of the Mexican gene pool. If one stands before the archaeological site of Tlatelolco in the middle of Mexico City, the Aztec pyramid in the sacred precinct rises before the early colonial church of Santiago Tlatelolco, while modern tower blocks look down. Here we see all three cultures – Aztec, Spanish, Mestizo – gathered together as one.

Modern Mexicans, like their Aztec forbearers, carry a deep cultural memory and it is both fitting and understandable that just as the Aztecs looked back, misty-eyed and proud, at their own Toltec heritage so do Mexicans look back with pride at the Aztec peoples. One only need consider the Mexican flag: centred amid the green, white and red vertical stripes sits an eagle holding a snake and standing atop a cactus. This image was important in the Aztec world, signifying the sacred spot where Huitzilopochtli, the god of war and the sun, told his people to build the great city of Tenochtitlán. It forms the central image of the frontispiece on *The Codex Mendoza*.

Veneration for the Aztec past is palpable at every level in Mexico, including the administrative: the central government funds archaeology, while the native archaeologists themselves unearth the past in honour of the national heritage. Many of the funds come from the federally backed Institute of Anthropology and History, and they seem to have poured a small fortune into the excavation of the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlán, the great symbol of the Aztec city. When the excavation was underway between 1978 and 1982, the suitably named archaeological leader Eduard Matos Moctezuma became something of a national celebrity.

It is important to note that the Spanish conquest did not mean the complete destruction of Aztec culture right away, but it did have a profound and immediate impact on the nature and systems of government. Human sacrifice was abolished instantly and the Aztec tax system died in 1521, followed with the continuance of native warfare tactics and the existing systems and arteries of trade. The more overt, outward trappings of the state religion also came under attack from the Christians' fervent missionary zeal.

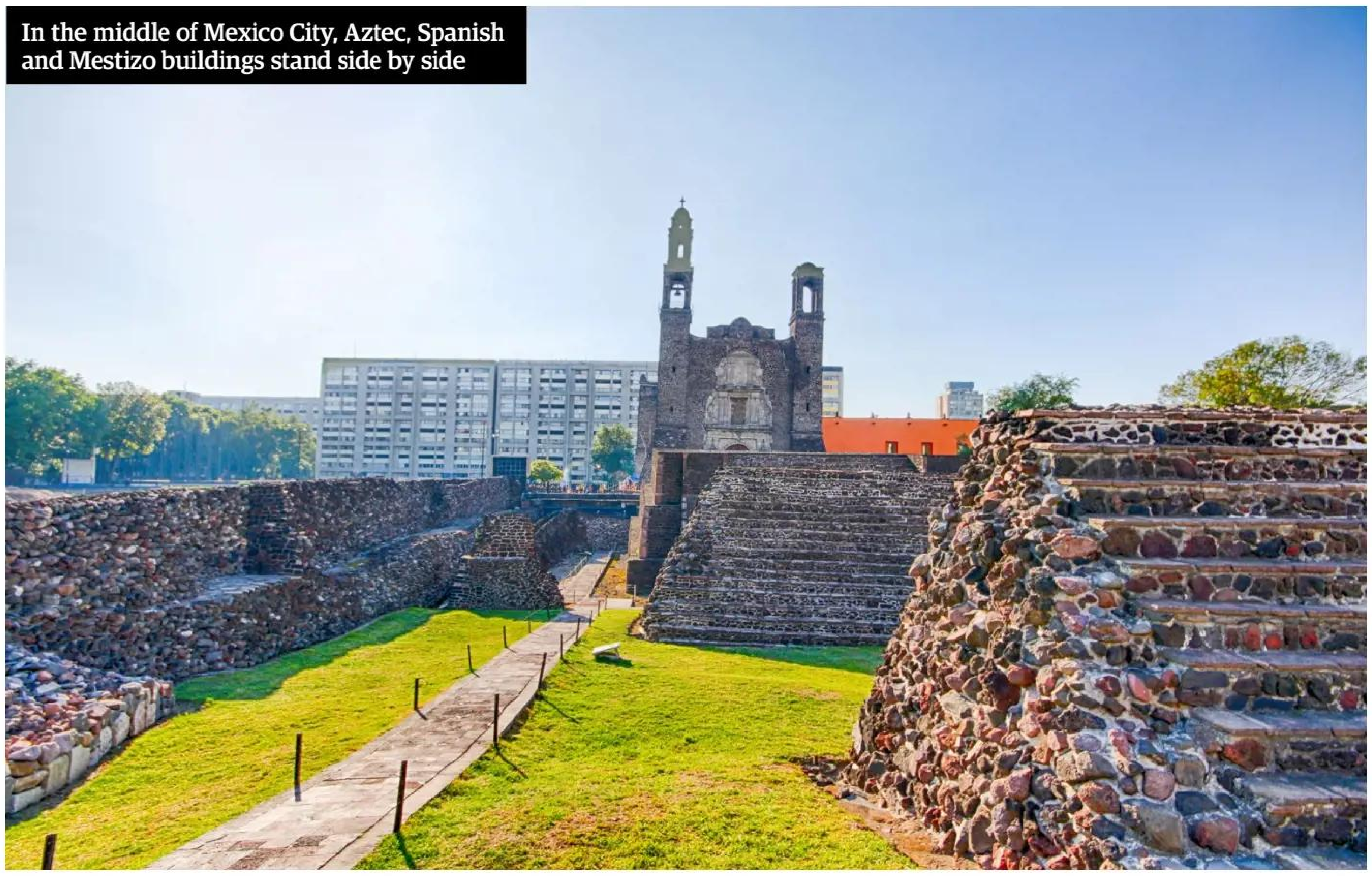
Aztec-inspired designs remain a popular fixture in contemporary fashion styles

Aztec peasant life, however, continued mostly unaffected and it endured in rural areas for a long time. In some areas it still continues largely unchanged to his day. The Nahuatl language also survived the conquest and even today is spoken by more than a million people across Mexico, remaining an important, living repository of ancient stories, myths and legends.

Even during colonial times, for the peasants in the countryside, the farmers and fishermen, it mattered little whether they were ruled by, and paid their taxes to, Moctezuma II or Philip II. The calpolli, or collection of families that lived and worked in the same area, remained the centre of their social life. And while the Spanish conquest may have marked the end of the great pyramid- and temple-building projects that dominated their landscape, the common folk continued to build and live in the same kinds of simple houses.

Similarly, the traditional tools employed by the common people remained in use, as did the distinctive orange, unglazed pottery. Even after the introduction of iron, all across the countryside workers retained and manufactured obsidian tools. Archaeologists have shown that iron nails and glazed ceramics did not start appearing in rural sites until beyond 1650. And while this retention of native tradition might simply reflect an unwillingness to change, some historians argue that it was a conscious decision taken by many common people in a bid to boost their political

"For the peasants, farmers and fishermen, it mattered little whether their taxes were paid to Moctezuma II or Philip II"



In the middle of Mexico City, Aztec, Spanish and Mestizo buildings stand side by side

influence and their economic standing, while also exerting more influence over their daily lives.

Of course, they could not hold back the tide, and Spanish language and culture eventually washed through every area of people's lives. Yet the Nahuatl culture was not entirely overwhelmed. Even today there are Nahuatl Indians living in Mexico. The term 'Indian' is controversial, of course, especially when used in relation to Native American people in the USA. In Mesoamerica, it was a term used by the Spaniards to designate any native people and to differentiate them from their European 'overlords', whether Aztecs, Mayas, Zapotecs or any other kind of people. Today in Mexico, its use has changed and the problematic term 'Indian' is employed in relation to anyone who speaks a native language and who lives in rural poverty.

Modern Nahuatl Indians are not Aztecs but their lives contain echoes of that culture. The techniques used to construct traditional adobe-built homes are said to be almost identical to their ancestors'. In addition, their diet of maize, beans, chillies, avocados and squashes is also very similar to that of the Aztecs. Even with textile production, many Nahuatl Indians still spin their thread by hand and use a backstrap loom "virtually identical to that used by the Aztecs", according to Professor of Anthropology Dr. Michael E. Smith. Obviously, Spanish and Mestizo culture has infiltrated the Indians' lives – they spin wool and eat pork and chicken – but these people provide further proof that, on so many levels, modern Mexican life and culture is underpinned by the vestiges of the Aztec past.

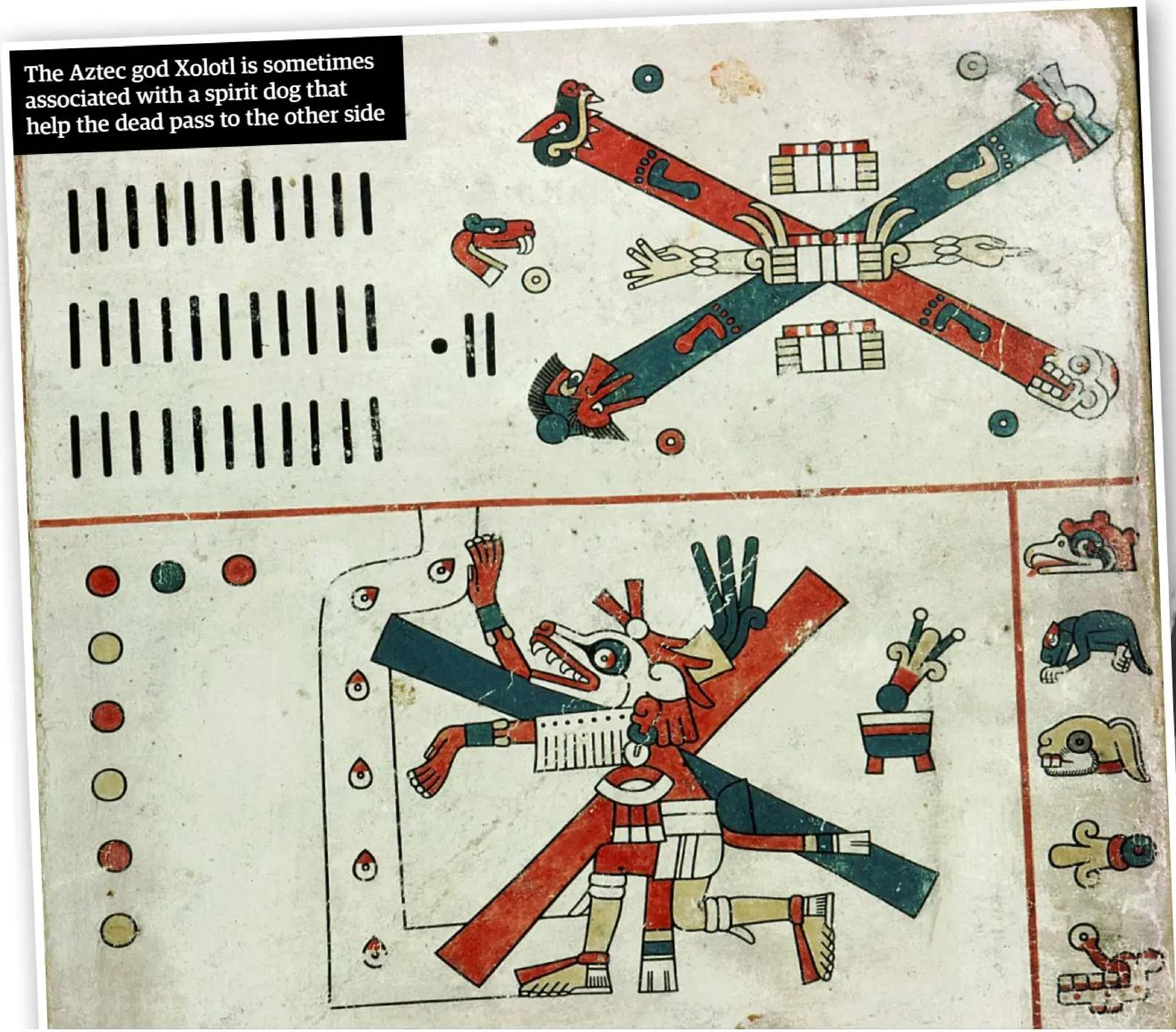
Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo

The celebrated Mexican artists revered their nation's Aztec past

Diego Rivera was a prominent Mexican painter whose large frescoes helped establish the mural movement in Mexican art. Between 1922 and his death in 1957, Rivera painted murals in, among other places, Mexico City, Chapingo, Cuernavaca, San Francisco, Detroit, and New York City and was noted for incorporating Aztec influences into his work.

Among his most famous murals is *The History of Mexico*, commissioned for the stairwell of the National Palace in Mexico City, which he painted between 1929 and 1935. The north section of the mural celebrates the richness of the Aztec world and places the sun at its centre. Here he depicts aspects of the Aztecs' religion, including the revering of snakes and jaguars. The Aztecs remained a recurring theme in his work.

The same is true of his wife, Frida Kahlo, who emerged as arguably the most famous Mexican painter of all time. Like her husband, with whom she shared a turbulent marriage, she was highly political and looked back to the echoes of her nation's Aztec past. Her painting *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* from 1940, for example, mixes Christian and Aztec imagery, with the thorn necklace echoing Christ's crown of thorns while at the same recalling Aztec ritual where priests performed self-mutilation with thorns and spines. The dead hummingbird around her neck, meanwhile, is thought to be sacred to Huitzilopochtli, the god of sun and of war and the chief god of Tenochtitlán.



The Aztec god Xolotl is sometimes associated with a spirit dog that help the dead pass to the other side

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, who incorporated Aztec imagery into their artwork

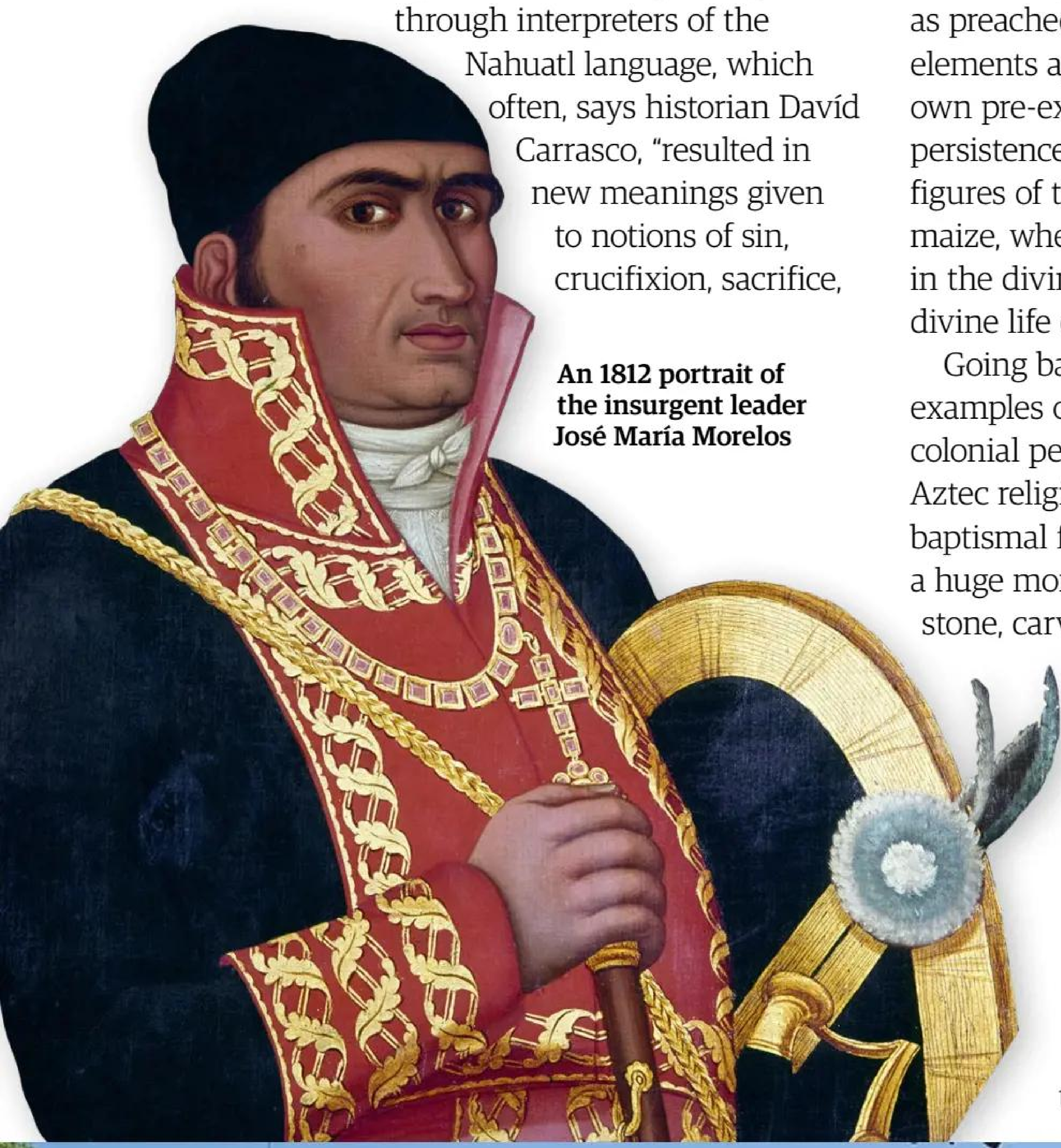
Interestingly, the Nahuatl language not only runs through place names across Mexico – from Coyoacan to Churubusco – it has also crept into the English language. Just consider tomato from tomatl, coyote from coyotl or chocolate from chocolatl, to name but a few.

> "The Aztecs took elements of Christianity and blended these with their own beliefs"

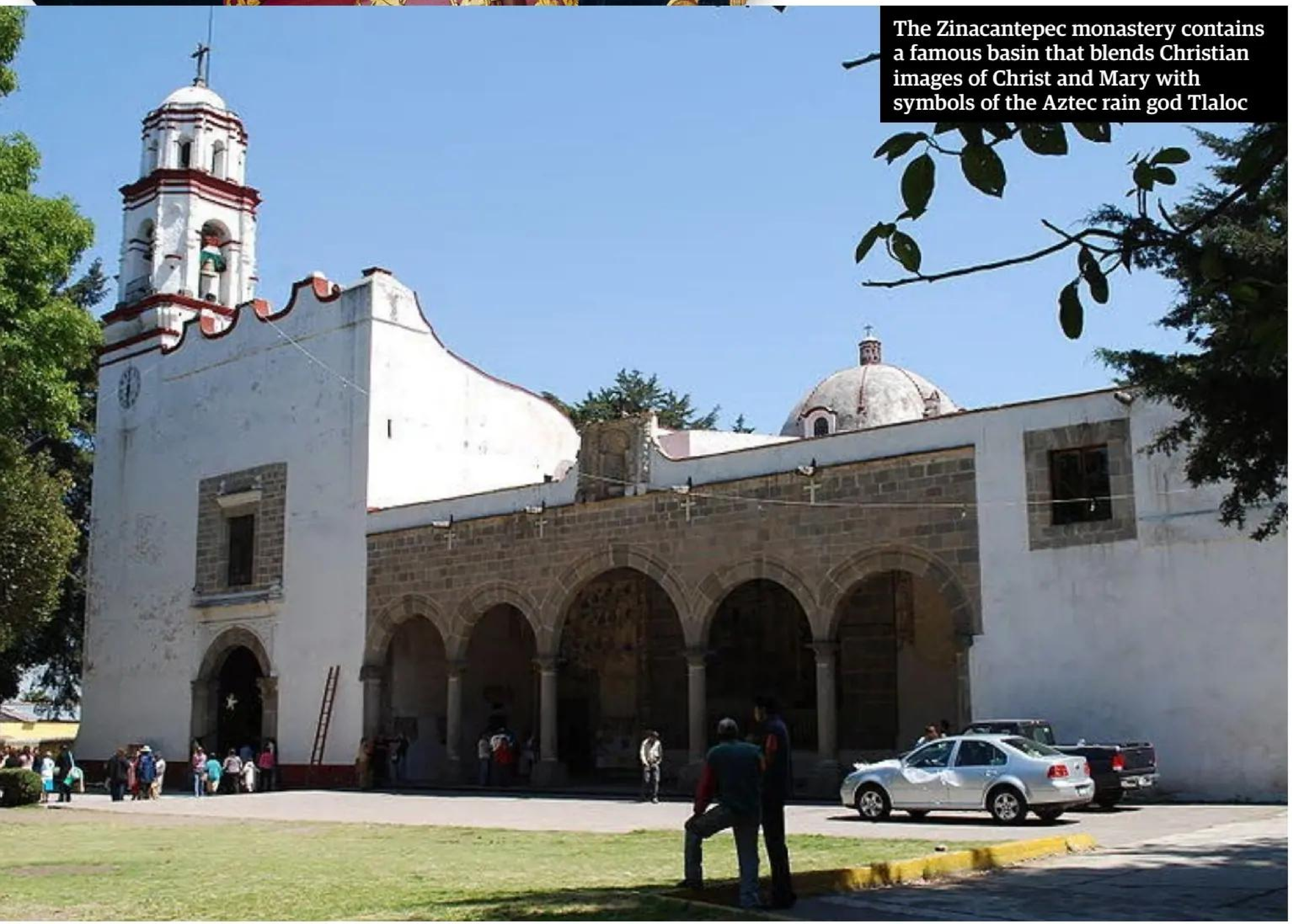
And while the Spanish missionaries, unlike many invaders, including the Aztecs themselves, did not incorporate or appropriate the gods of those they conquered – monotheism is not an inclusive belief system – they did not, or could not, destroy all traces of their new subjects' religion. The friars and missionaries were also forced to adapt new definitions and compromises when speaking through interpreters of the Nahuatl language, which often, says historian Davíd Carrasco, "resulted in new meanings given to notions of sin, crucifixion, sacrifice, salvation, saints and God." The native people, he says, were also resistant to the newly built Christian churches, forcing the missionaries to construct large, open-air precincts that could host masses and sermons.

In addition, and much to chagrin of the friars, the native people did not just accept Catholicism as preached by the missionaries, but took whatever elements appealed and blended these with their own pre-existing beliefs. One example of the persistence of pre-Christian belief is to be found in figures of the crucified Christ manufactured from maize, whereby the makers combined their belief in the divine seeds with their understanding of the divine life of Christ.

Going back even further, there are numerous examples of sculptures crafted during the early colonial period that incorporate both Christian and Aztec religious imagery. A prime example is the baptismal font in the monastery at Zinacantepec, a huge monolithic basin cut from grey volcanic stone, carved with a design that combines Christian images of Christ and Mary with symbols of the rain god Tlaloc. Perhaps the most powerful blend of Christian and Aztec belief is found with the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose apparition is said to have appeared in the colonial period at a sanctuary closely associated with a native goddess. She is said to have spoken the Nahuatl language, was of the same racial colouring as the Aztec



An 1812 portrait of the insurgent leader José María Morelos



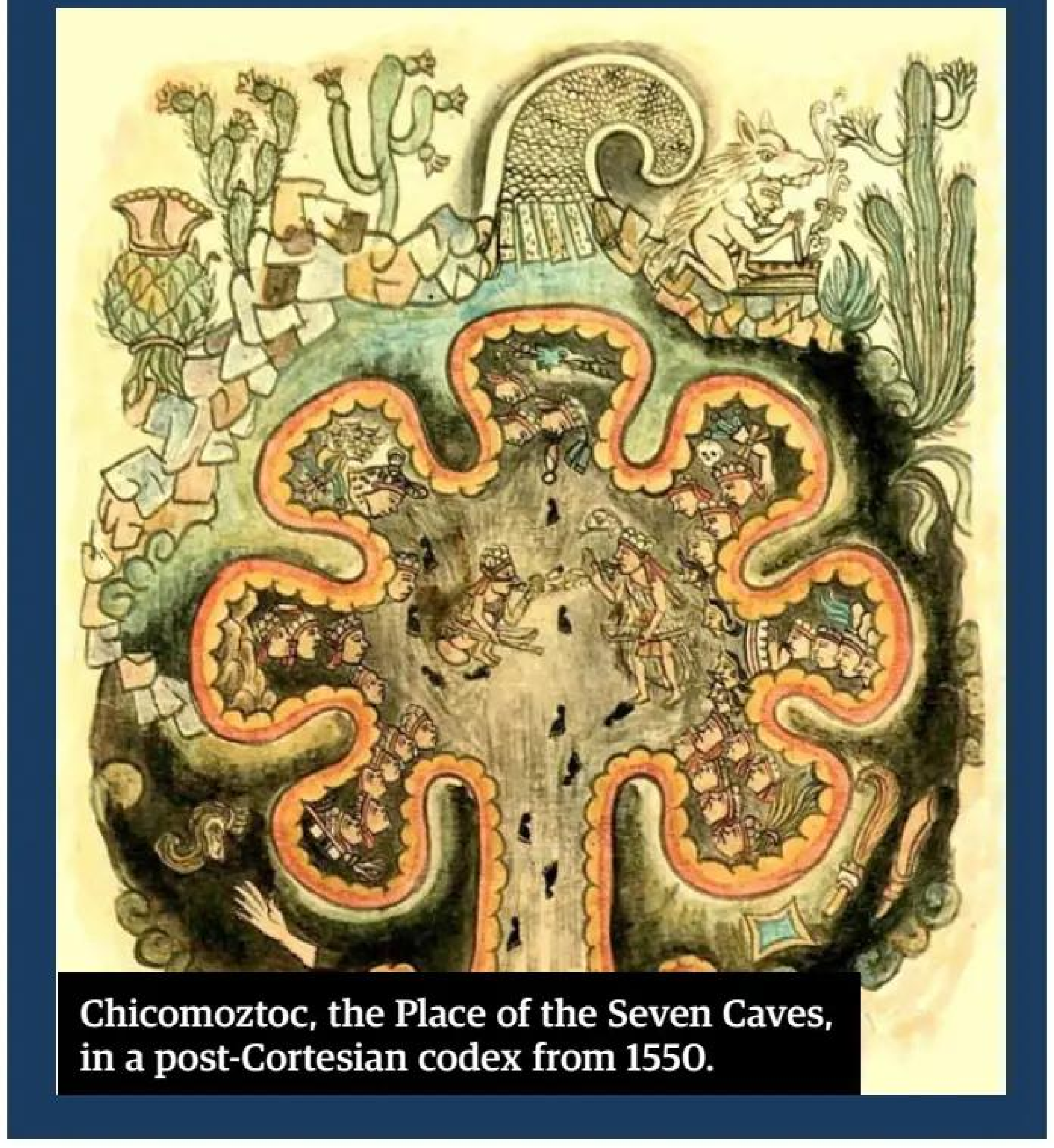
The Zinacantepec monastery contains a famous basin that blends Christian images of Christ and Mary with symbols of the Aztec rain god Tlaloc

Aztlán & Mexica

The mythic home of the Aztecs and the people they became

Of all the contributions the native people have given to modern Mexico, perhaps the most prominent is the country's name. According to some sources, the native people of what is now known as the Mexican valley or basin emerged from a fertile hill known as Chicomoztoc (Place of the Seven Caves) and inhabited Aztlán (Place of the White Heron), an ancient, water-bounded settlement, whose people were called the Azteca. They emerged on the prompting of the great god Huitzilopochtli and, in *The Codex Aubin*, it says that upon their departure from Aztlán the god named them the Mexica, the origin of the term Mexican.

Over the years, the concept of Aztlán as the place of origin of the pre-Columbian Mexican civilization has become a symbol for various Mexican nationalist and indigenous movements, including the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, a civil rights movement in the US that sought to promote the rights of Mexican-Americans. The movement was fuelled by tensions with the Los Angeles Police Department. As with the Black Power movement, it fell victim to repression and police brutality. Aztlán's appropriation by the Chicano Movement is often credited to the activist Oscar Zeta Acosta and many consider this hallowed motherland to refer to the lands of Northern Mexico that were annexed by the United States during the Mexican–American War. In truth, no one can say for sure where Aztlán lies, though it still lives in the hearts of many Latinos who look back with pride on their Aztec past.



Chicomoztoc, the Place of the Seven Caves, in a post-Cortesian codex from 1550.

BANCO DE MEXICO
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Native imagery, like this Coyolxauhqui stone carving, features on much Mexican currency

ÁRBOL DE LA ESPERANZA MANTENTE FIRME

Day of the Dead offering altar at Casa Azul, the home of Frida Kahlo in Mexico City

people and showed favour to the native people, while making demands of the Spaniards on their behalf. She is now revered the world over as a sacred 'Mother of Mexico'.

Perhaps the most famous expression of Aztec ceremonial practice that survives today is the Day of the Dead, which is really a celebration of life and a memorial to the ancestral past. Archaeology has shown that in Aztec culture the dead were often buried in close proximity to the home, being still considered part of their family to be hosted within the domestic compound. The rituals and offerings made to the deceased members of the family are seen as the basis for the Day of the Dead ceremonies held by modern Mexicans.

It is said that during Aztec times, these ceremonies were likely held in high summer but were moved to October 31 and then the first days of November to tie in with the Christian triduum of All Saints' Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day. These celebrations now unfold across America as well as in Mexico and have become public displays rather than just ceremonies held by Mexican people in their homes.

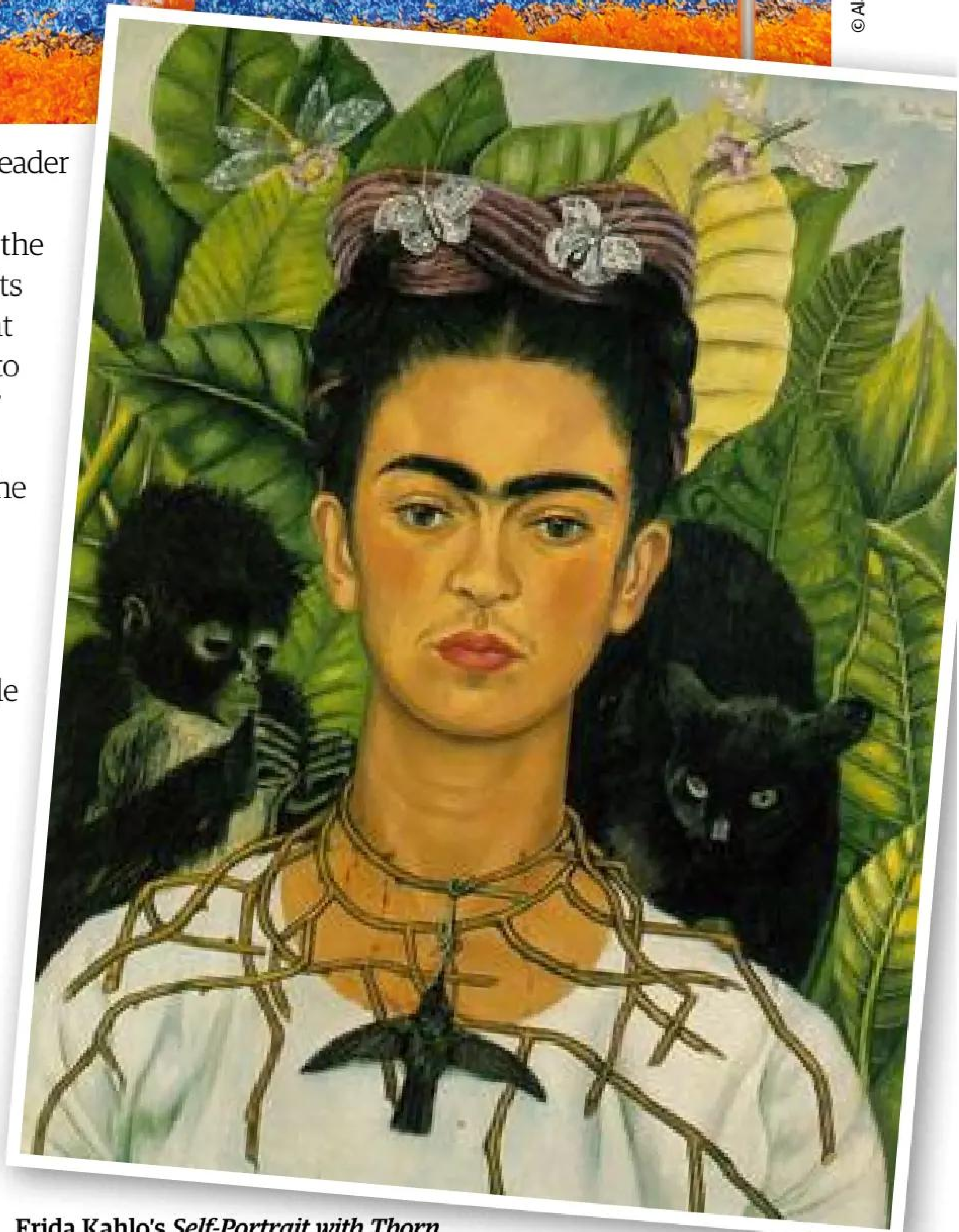
The enduring fascination with Aztec society has spawned countless films, books, and even video games

Whether in public or private, the Day of the Dead is usually celebrated with bright yellow or orange marigolds, known by the Aztecs as cempoalxochitl, which they associated with the completion of a life lived. Altars, especially in the home, are further decorated with sugar skulls, photographs of the deceased and food offerings, like the sweet rolls 'pan de muerto' (or 'bread of the dead'). Altars are usually lit by candles and perfumed with copal incense. "If you look closely at these altars," writes Davíd Carrasco, "you may notice a humorous, tender image of the Aztec spirit-dog Xolotl, standing on a pedestal by the underground river on the way to Mictlan, waiting to guide the souls of the dead to other shore." In Mexico, the first day of the celebrations is set aside to remember those who died in infancy or childhood. Adults are remembered the following day.

Aztec art has also found its way into the work of modern painters and sculptors such as Diego Rivera (see 'Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo', p.113) and José Clemente Orozco, with their celebrated murals, and also the paintings of Frida Kahlo, perhaps the most famous of all Mexico's visual artists. Aztec imagery also appears on Mexican bank notes and is widely employed in traditional dances.

During the Mexican wars of independence from Spain during the early 19th century, the insurgent leader José María Morelos invoked the great Aztec warrior people and the Spanish slaughter in the precincts of Tenochtitlán, proclaiming, "Spirits of Moctezuma… celebrate… this happy instant in which your children have come together to avenge the injustices and outrages."

Nowadays, there are more peaceful times in Mexico. The leading academic journal is called *Aztlán* (the name of the mythical place of origin of the Aztecs), while the eagle and serpent remain recurring themes in Mexican art, as do skeletons that recall the Aztec skull racks. The Mexican past is alive in the Mexican present and it looks set to form an important part of a Mexican future. Some people might even say that Quetzalcoatl has returned and ensured that his nation and his people live on in a new and modern world.



Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* blends Aztec and Christian symbolism

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All about the market

The Aztec Empire was a trading network, with around 80 marketplaces in Tenochtitlán alone. One of the largest, the main marketplace in Tlatelolco, is depicted here. Spanish conquistadors thought the Tlatelolco market to be so large that it was impossible to see it all in one day, with flowers and food vying for space alongside gold and precious stones. A throned official keeps a watchful eye on proceedings, ready to step in to keep the peace if buyers and sellers disagree.

Blood on the stairs

Although Rivera idealised the Aztec culture in his murals, he was also willing to depict its seedier side. Human sacrifice was carried out by Aztec priests to repay a debt to the gods, who sacrificed themselves to sustain the world. Victims were killed on a stone slab in high temples accessed by a stairway; most commonly, the heart would be extracted and the body pushed down the stairs. Rivera referenced this grisly rite by painting bloodstains on the stairs of the temples.

Diego Rivera's *History of Mexico*

Perhaps the most famous visual portrayals of the Aztec period come from Diego Rivera, whose painted murals were commissioned by the Mexican government as propaganda to depict the history of the nation. Rivera's most famous works are housed in the National Palace in Mexico City, including *The History of Mexico*, a three-panel work in the main stairway. The mural presented here, *The Grand Tenochtitlán*, was painted in a corridor on the first floor in 1945.

Urban sprawl

Stretching out in the background is the vast sprawl of Tenochtitlán, with up to five square miles of pyramids, plazas, palaces, gardens and canals indicating the wealth and prosperity of the largest city in pre-Columbian America. Essentially an island city built on Lake Texcoco with bridges that could be pulled up for defence, the heart of the city was the Templo Mayor, a two-temple complex dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, god of war, and Tlaloc, god of rain and agriculture.

The mysterious seductress

Who is the mysterious woman with long hair, make-up, a headdress of lilies, painted nails and tattoos on her legs? Some think she is Xochiquetzal, the goddess of flowers and love, others think she is a courtesan. Whoever she may be, the woman is seductively raising her dress while a warrior presents her with a grisly tribute – the severed arm of a white invader. No need for flowers or chocolates to woo this lady.

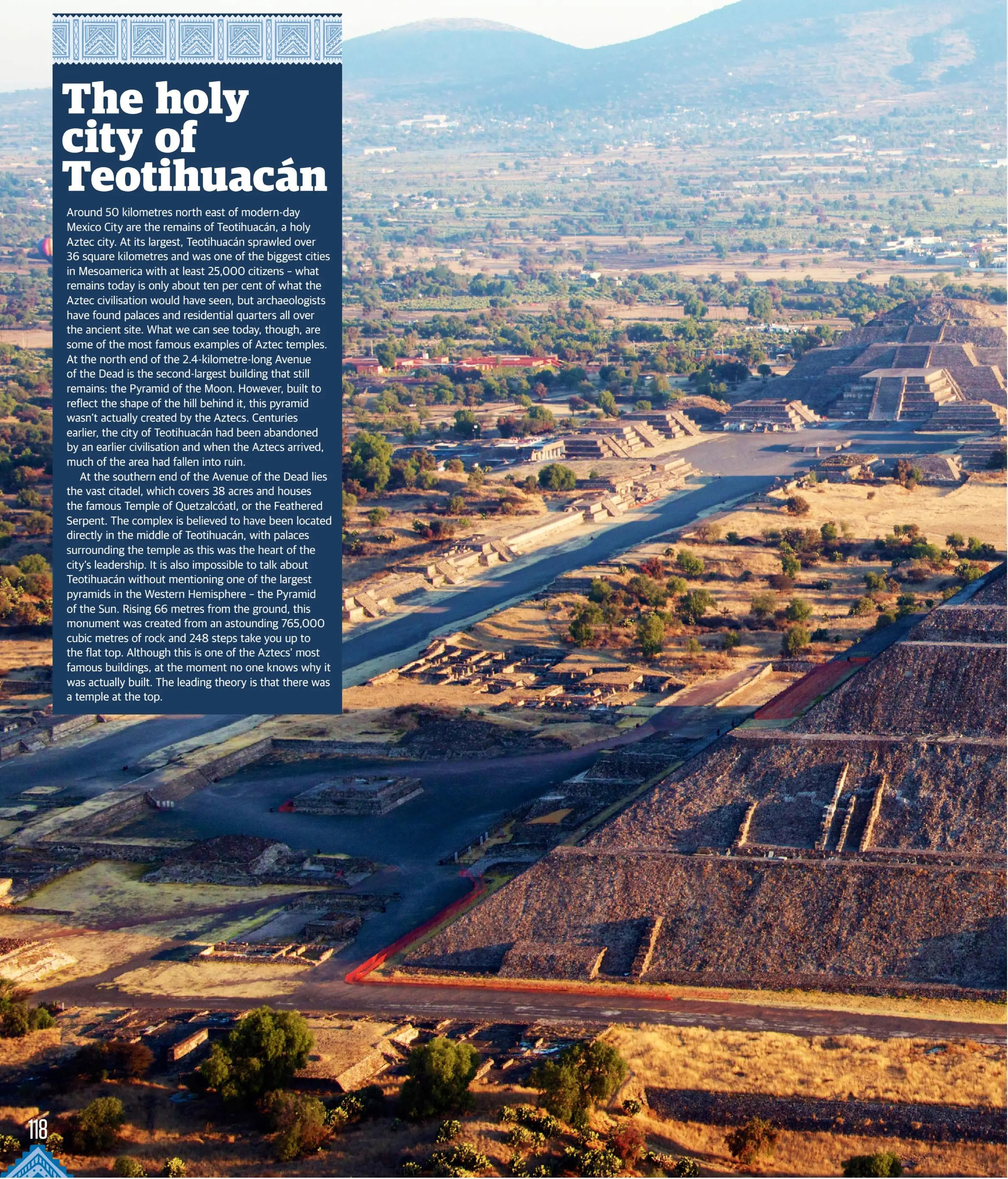
The doctor will see you now

Marketplaces were also the location where doctors touted their wares. Herbal medicines could be surprisingly effective, although the reasoning behind them was often flawed – fevers were treated with a laxative or diuretic that might purge the problem from the body, although the Aztecs believed that it was the heat of the fever itself that was being evacuated. Illnesses that were sent from the gods may require alternative treatment, such as the patient covering themselves with the skin of a sacrificial victim.

The holy city of Teotihuacán

Around 50 kilometres north east of modern-day Mexico City are the remains of Teotihuacán, a holy Aztec city. At its largest, Teotihuacán sprawled over 36 square kilometres and was one of the biggest cities in Mesoamerica with at least 25,000 citizens – what remains today is only about ten per cent of what the Aztec civilisation would have seen, but archaeologists have found palaces and residential quarters all over the ancient site. What we can see today, though, are some of the most famous examples of Aztec temples. At the north end of the 2.4-kilometre-long Avenue of the Dead is the second-largest building that still remains: the Pyramid of the Moon. However, built to reflect the shape of the hill behind it, this pyramid wasn't actually created by the Aztecs. Centuries earlier, the city of Teotihuacán had been abandoned by an earlier civilisation and when the Aztecs arrived, much of the area had fallen into ruin.

At the southern end of the Avenue of the Dead lies the vast citadel, which covers 38 acres and houses the famous Temple of Quetzalcóatl, or the Feathered Serpent. The complex is believed to have been located directly in the middle of Teotihuacán, with palaces surrounding the temple as this was the heart of the city's leadership. It is also impossible to talk about Teotihuacán without mentioning one of the largest pyramids in the Western Hemisphere – the Pyramid of the Sun. Rising 66 metres from the ground, this monument was created from an astounding 765,000 cubic metres of rock and 248 steps take you up to the flat top. Although this is one of the Aztecs' most famous buildings, at the moment no one knows why it was actually built. The leading theory is that there was a temple at the top.



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The pyramid temple at Acatitlan

The small town of Acatitlan, 45 minutes north of Mexico City, is home to one of the best surviving examples of Aztec architecture – there sits a double pyramid temple facing a square that was probably used as a public arena during ceremonies. The temple itself followed the typical Aztec template of twin pyramids dedicated to the gods Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, and on the roof of the one in Acatitlan were two temples, a North and a South, dedicated to these two deities. The North Temple was Tlaloc's, and featured a sculpture of Chac Mool, the messenger of the gods who carried human sacrifice offerings. But the positioning of the temple at Acatitlan was a feat of Aztec engineering and understanding of the world around them. The pyramid complemented the surrounding landscape, in particular two mountains that are thought to have been reflected in the double pyramid temple. While this pyramid has become well known, we don't know much about the surrounding area under the Aztecs or the preceding Chichimecs thanks to the more modern buildings all around it.

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The snakes at Tenayuca

Founded circa 1224, Tenayuca was originally the Chichimec capital until that honour was moved to Tetzcoco. However, it wasn't left to decay because the Aztecs had moved in by 1325. The temple there was built in the early days of the city, and some scholars believe that it was the blueprint for the great temple at Tenochtitlán, with its four tiers facing a plaza. The three sides of the base not consisting of steps were decorated with a wall of stone serpents known as a coatepantli, and the snakes have been identified as xiuhcoatls, or fire serpents, which were the weapons of Huitzilopochtli, who was one of the six gods worshipped there. We know that the snakes were painted thanks to some greenish-blue paint that is still visible on the south and east sides, while black and white paint can be seen on those on the north wall. It's thought that these colours were related to sun worship.

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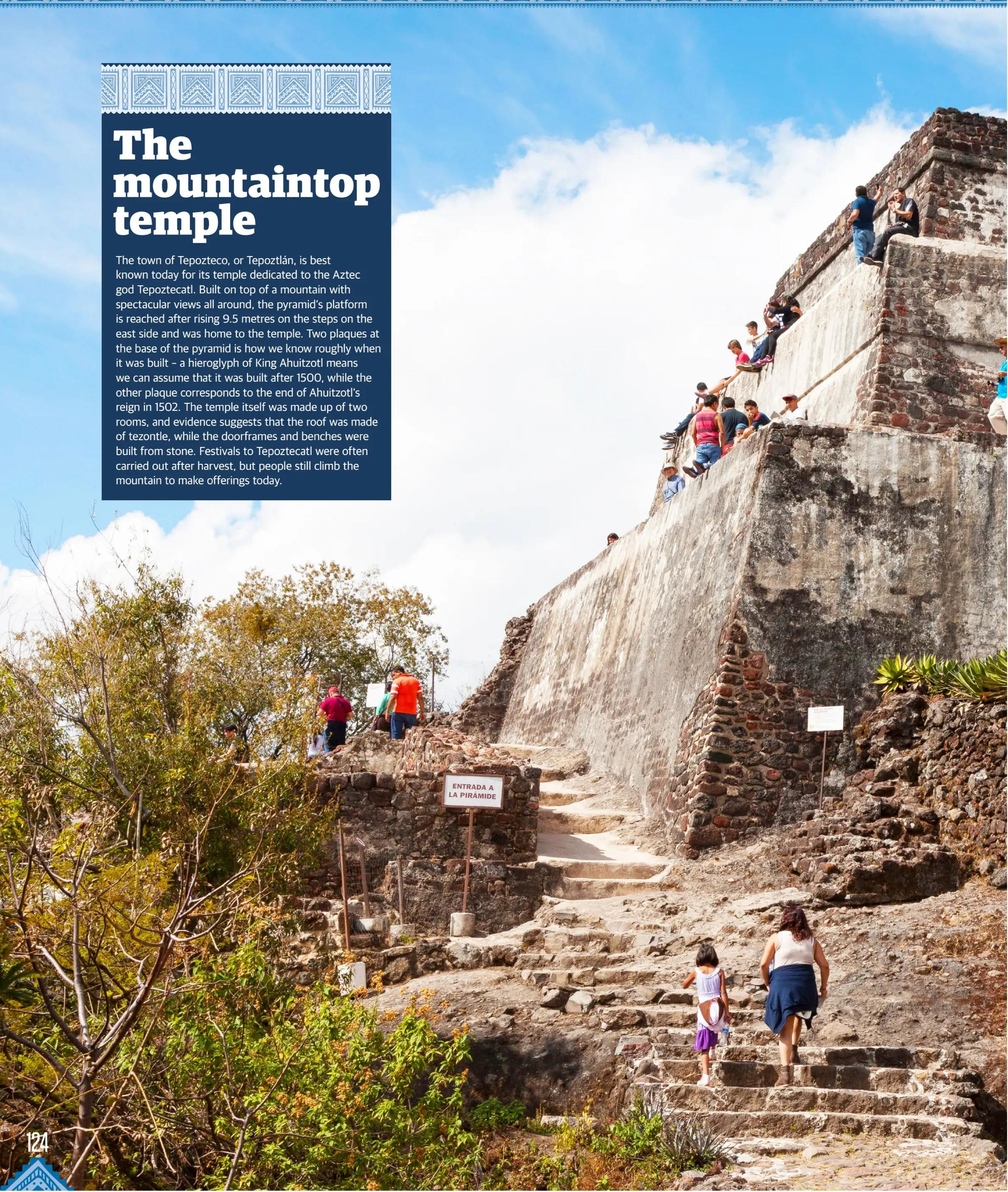
The mountaintop temple

The town of Tepozteco, or Tepoztlán, is best known today for its temple dedicated to the Aztec god Tepoztecatl. Built on top of a mountain with spectacular views all around, the pyramid's platform is reached after rising 9.5 metres on the steps on the east side and was home to the temple. Two plaques at the base of the pyramid is how we know roughly when it was built – a hieroglyph of King Ahuitzotl means we can assume that it was built after 1500, while the other plaque corresponds to the end of Ahuitzotl's reign in 1502. The temple itself was made up of two rooms, and evidence suggests that the roof was made of tezontle, while the doorframes and benches were built from stone. Festivals to Tepoztecatl were often carried out after harvest, but people still climb the mountain to make offerings today.



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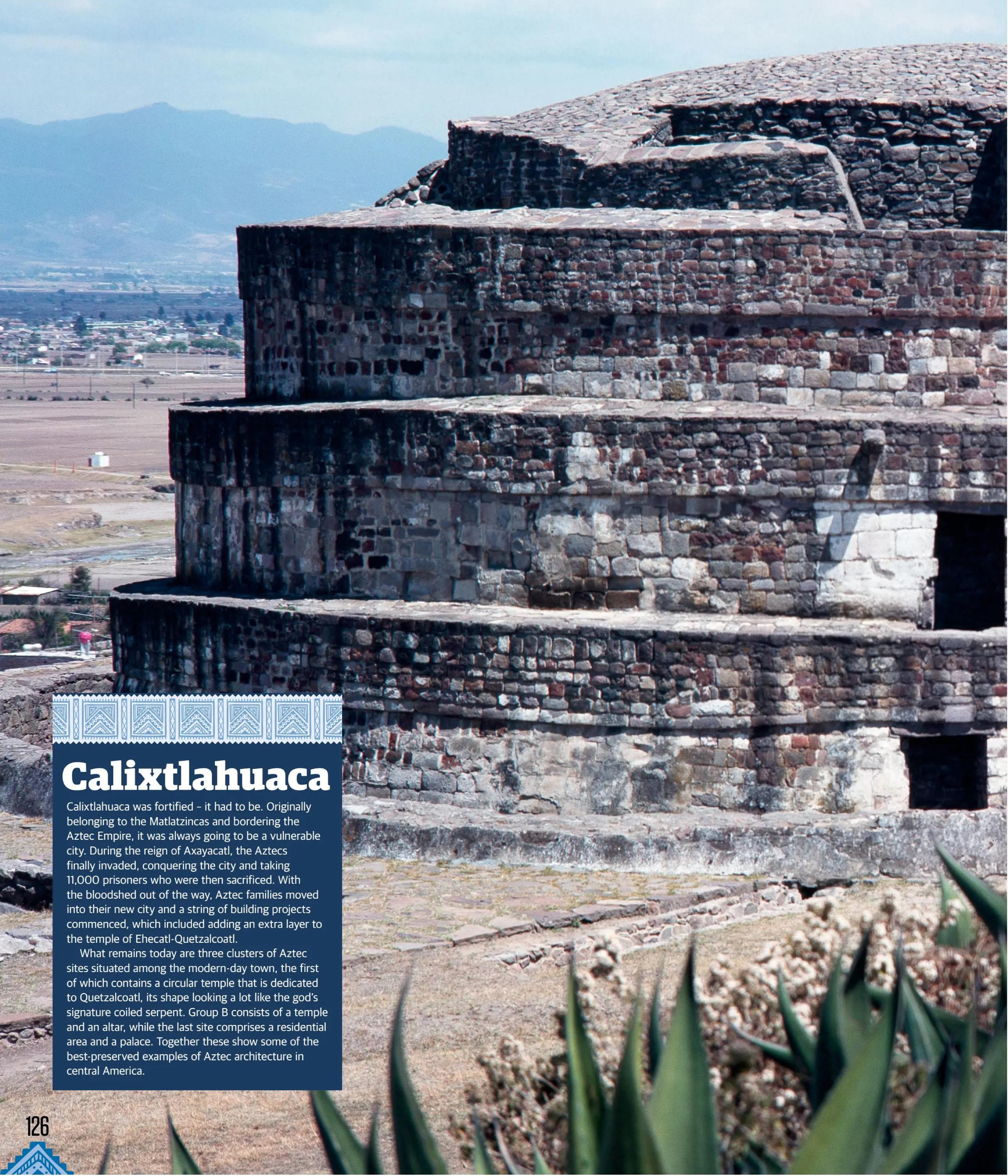

Calixtlahuaca

Calixtlahuaca was fortified – it had to be. Originally belonging to the Matlatzincas and bordering the Aztec Empire, it was always going to be a vulnerable city. During the reign of Axayacatl, the Aztecs finally invaded, conquering the city and taking 11,000 prisoners who were then sacrificed. With the bloodshed out of the way, Aztec families moved into their new city and a string of building projects commenced, which included adding an extra layer to the temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl.

What remains today are three clusters of Aztec sites situated among the modern-day town, the first of which contains a circular temple that is dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, its shape looking a lot like the god's signature coiled serpent. Group B consists of a temple and an altar, while the last site comprises a residential area and a palace. Together these show some of the best-preserved examples of Aztec architecture in central America.

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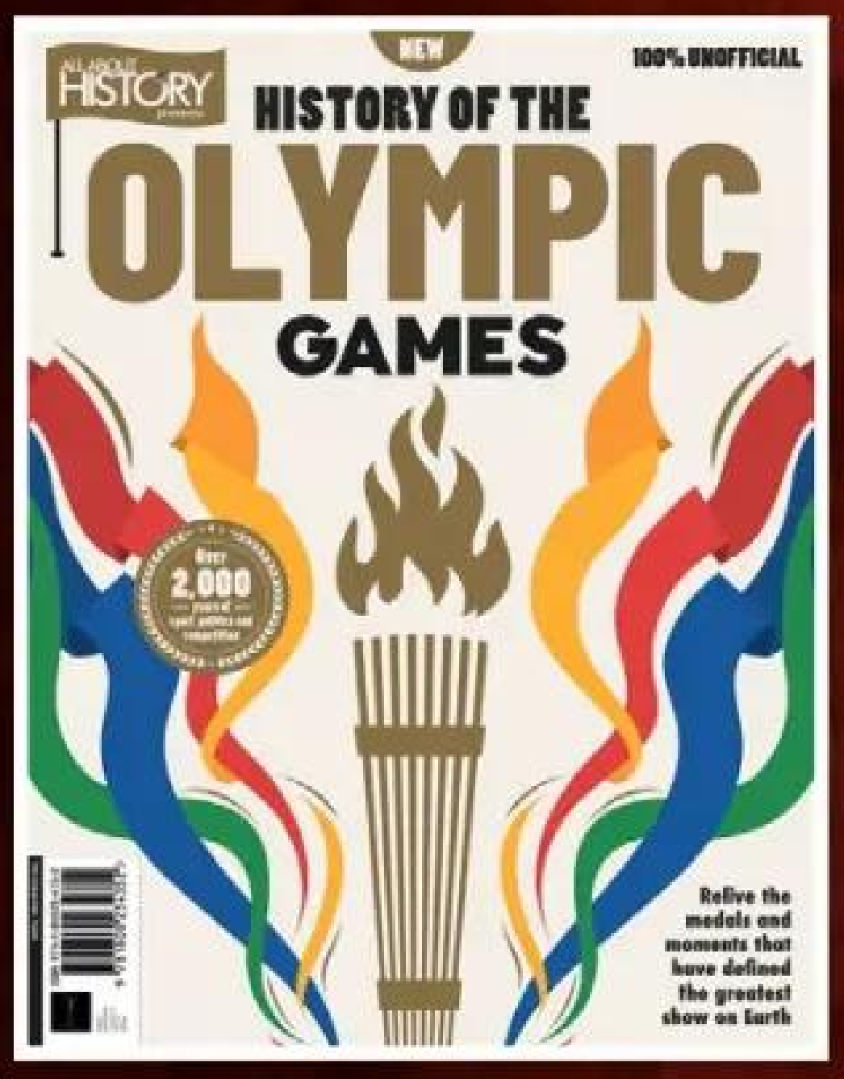
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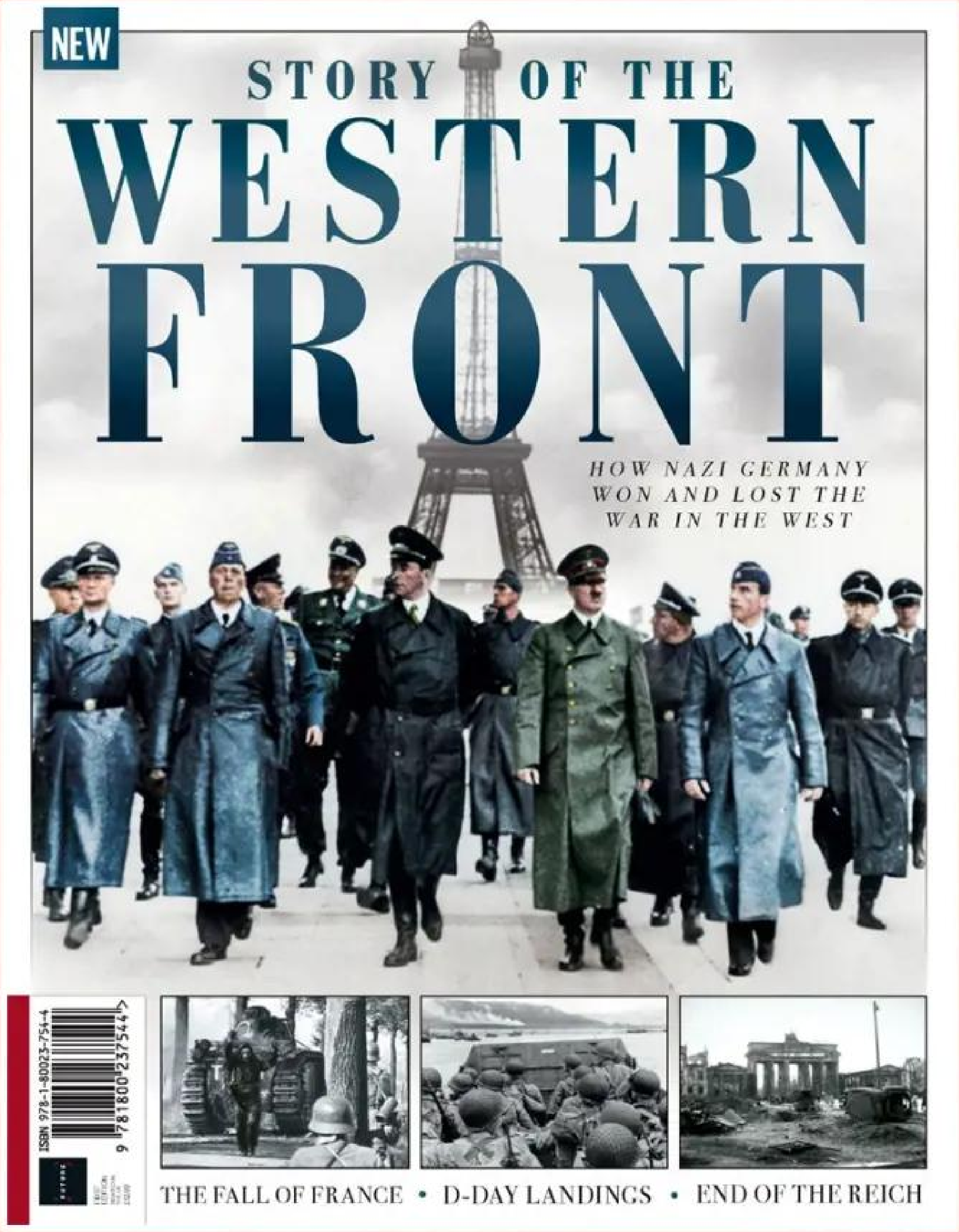
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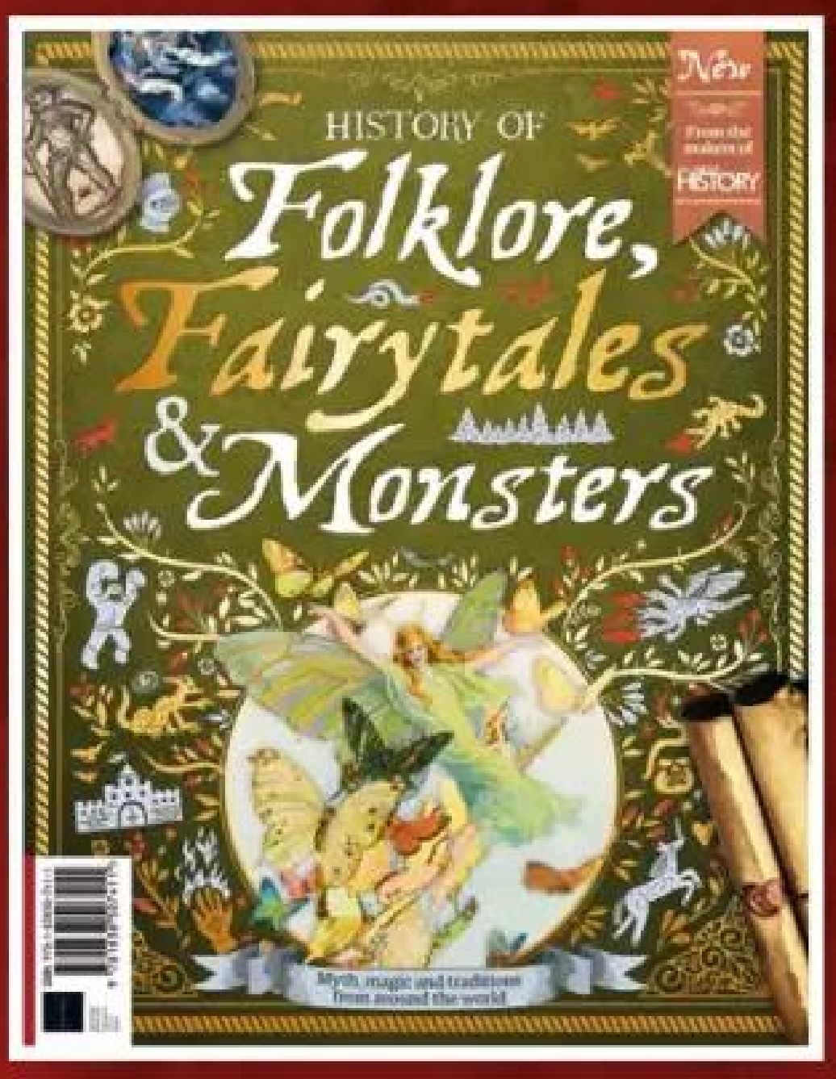
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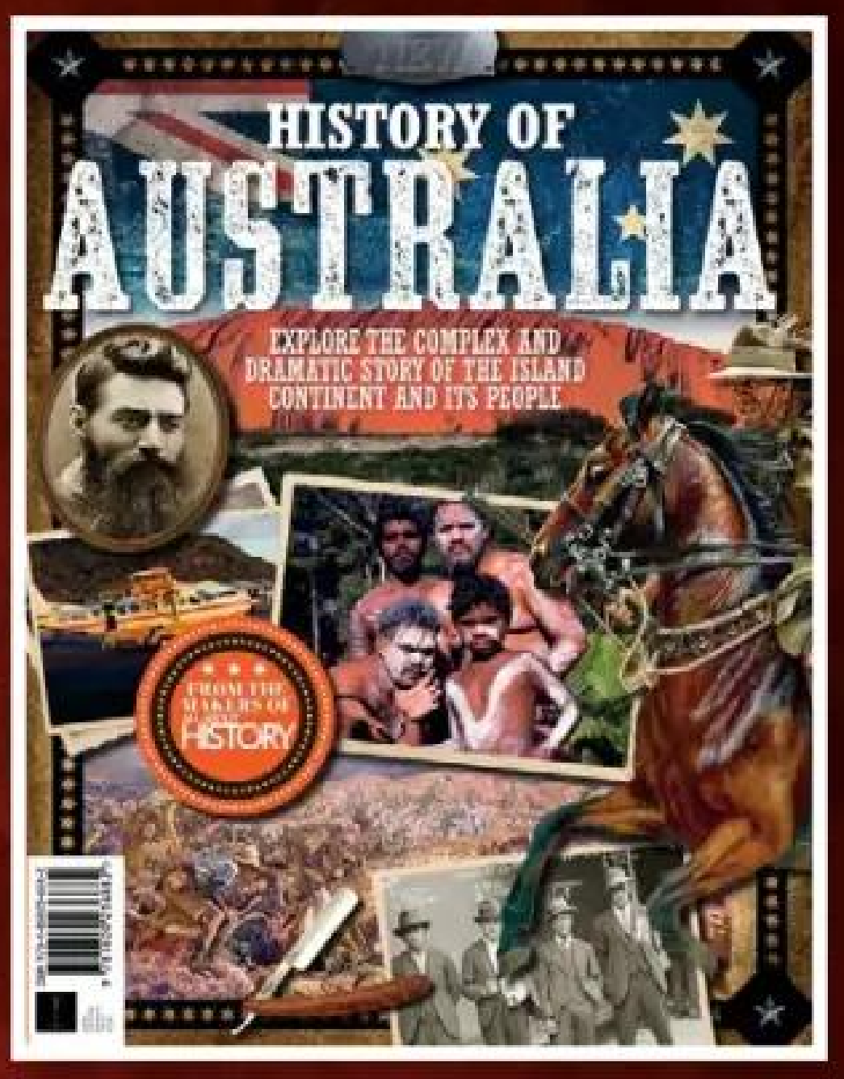
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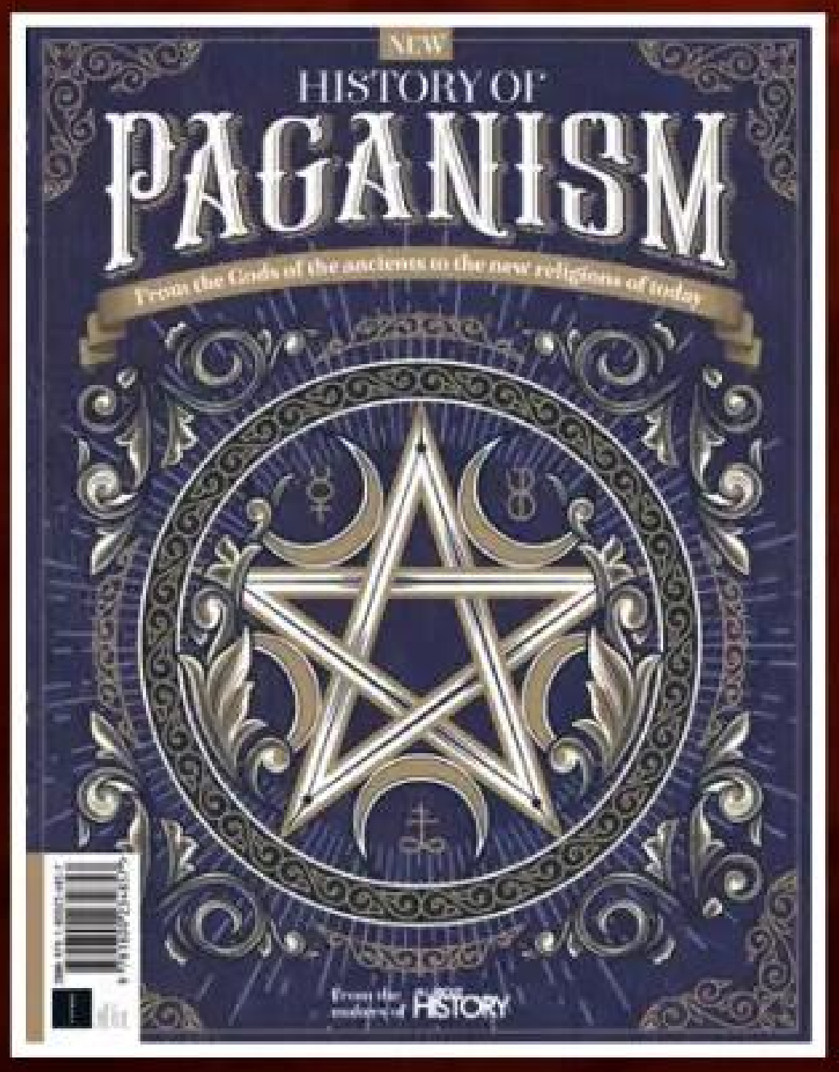
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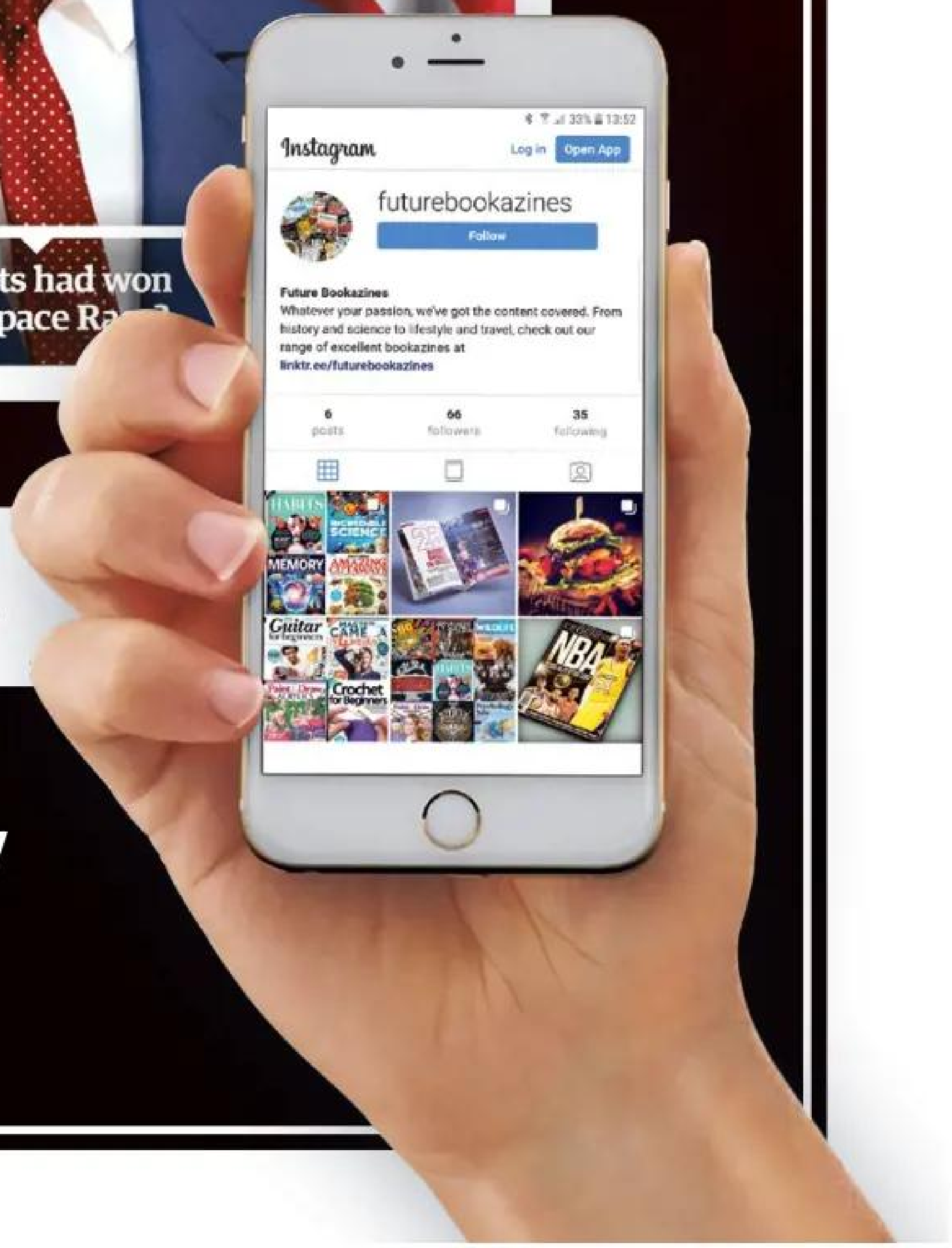
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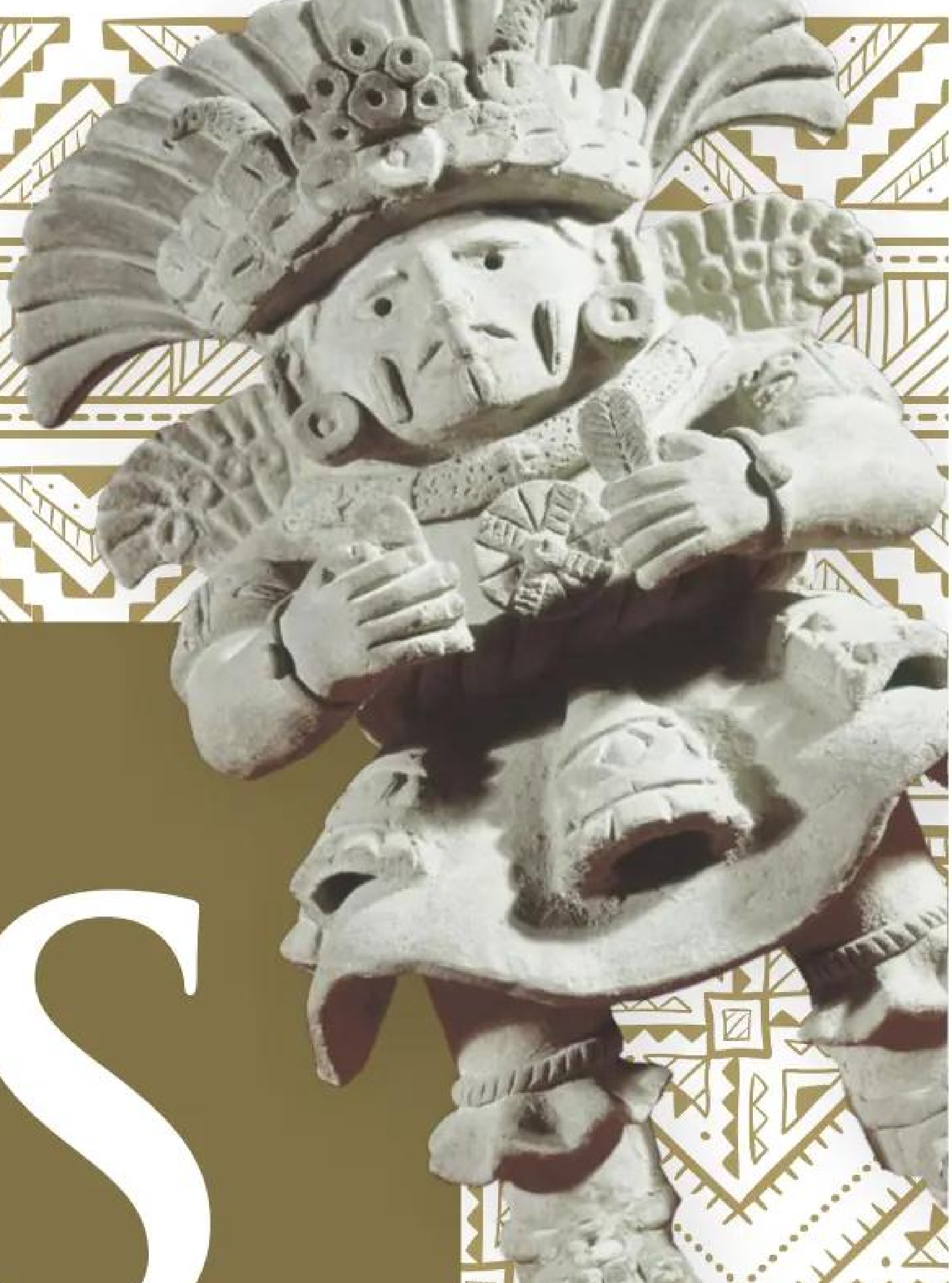

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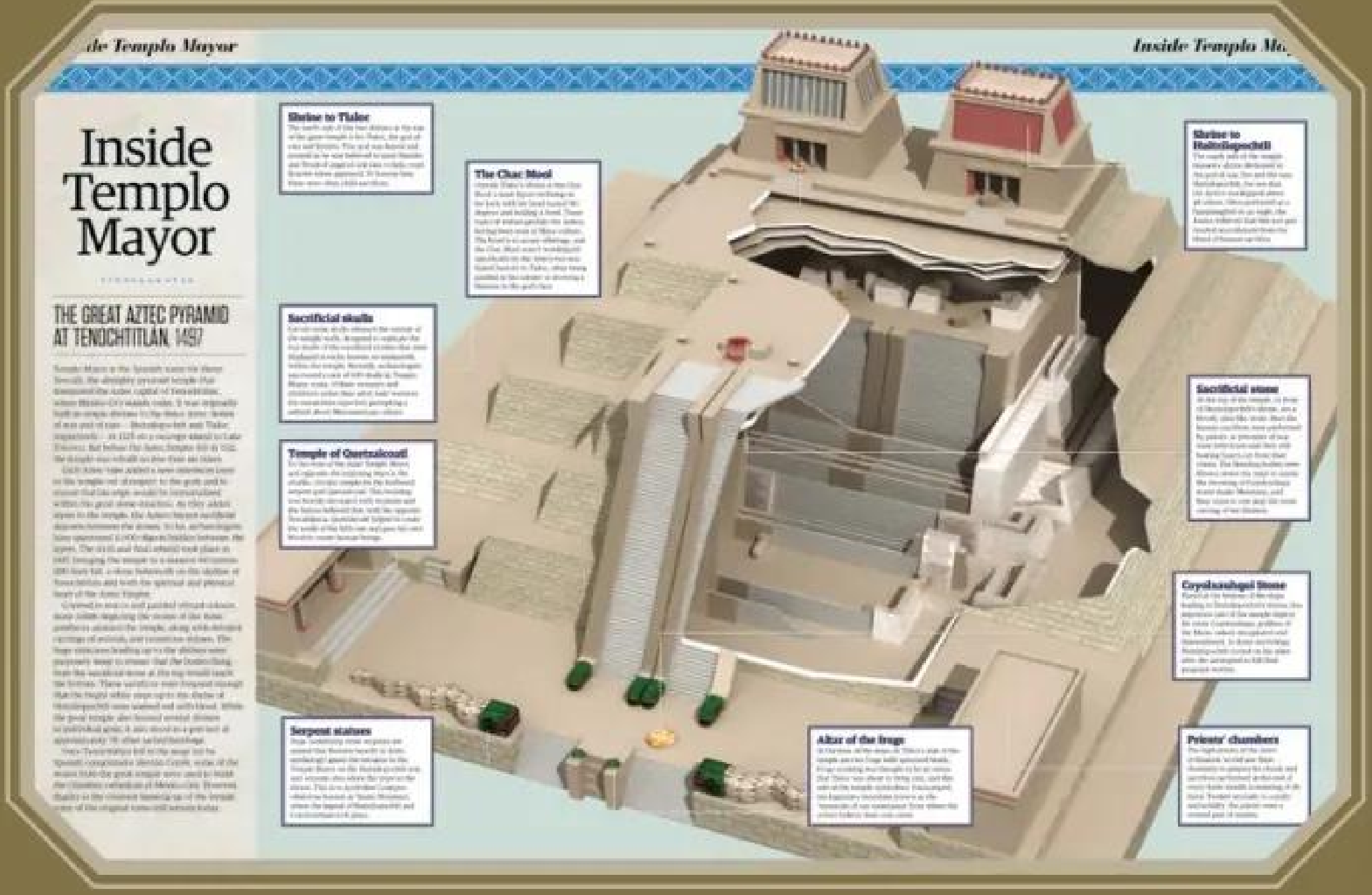

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THE GREAT AZTEC PYRAMID AT TENOCHTITLAN, 1497

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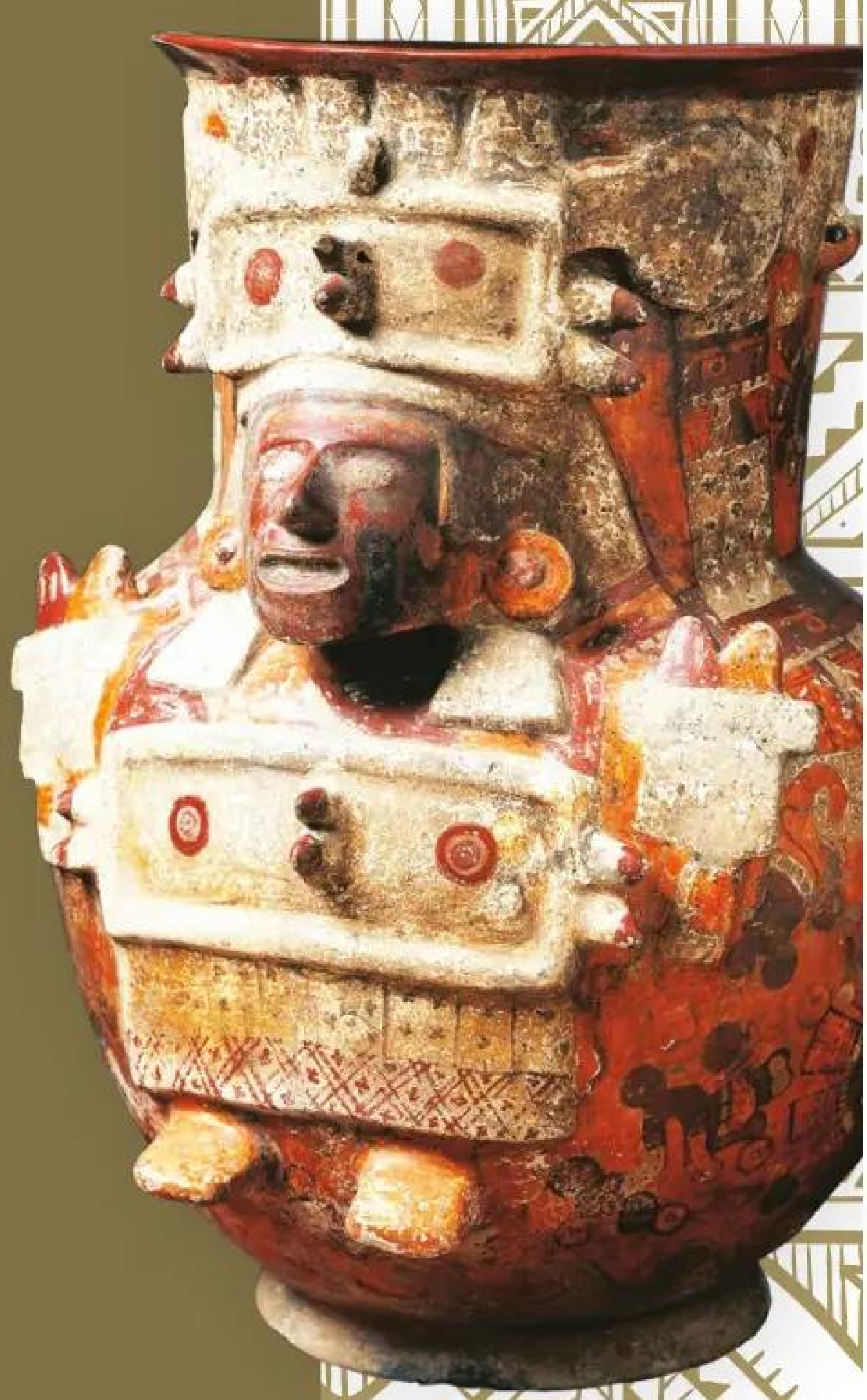

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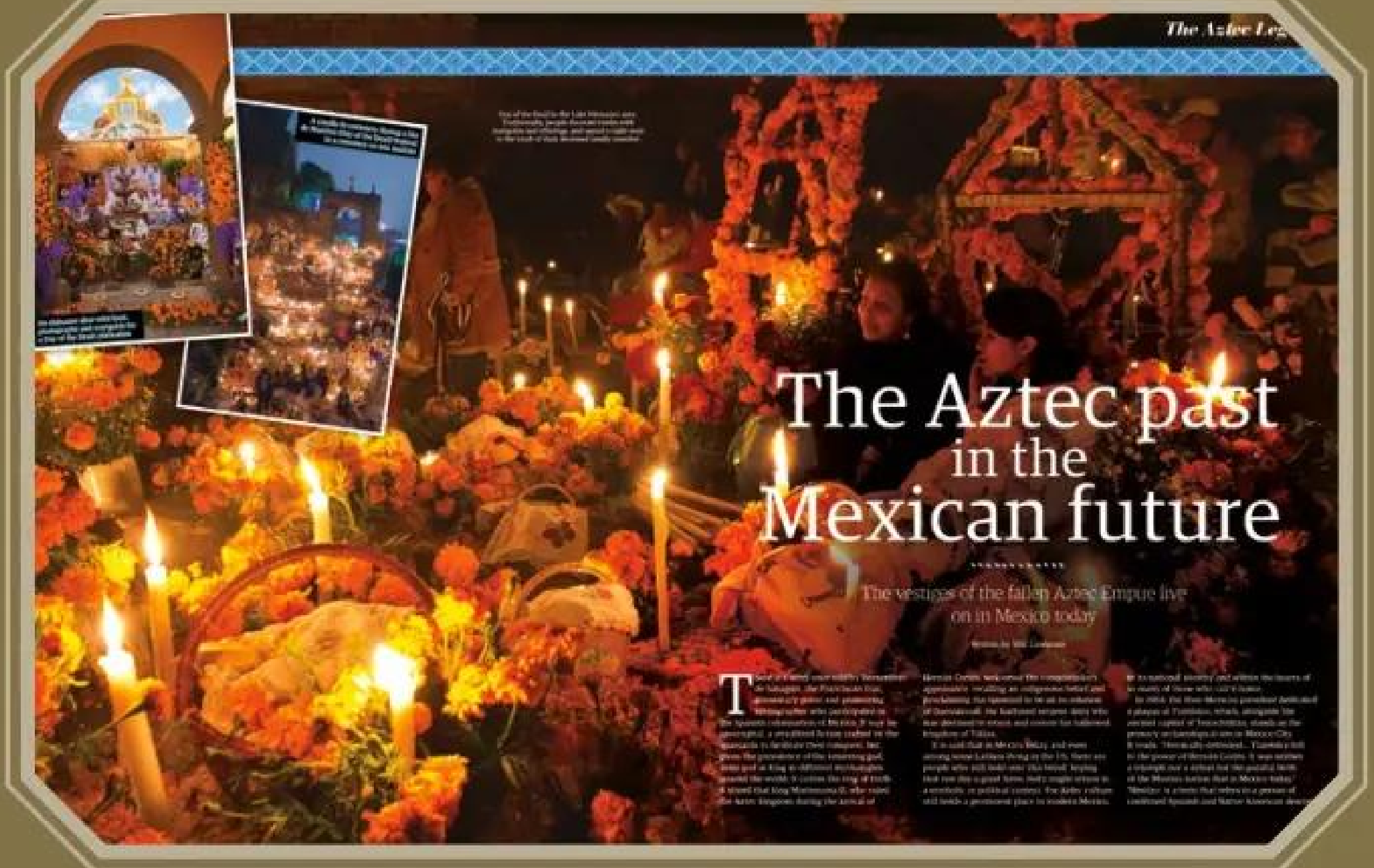

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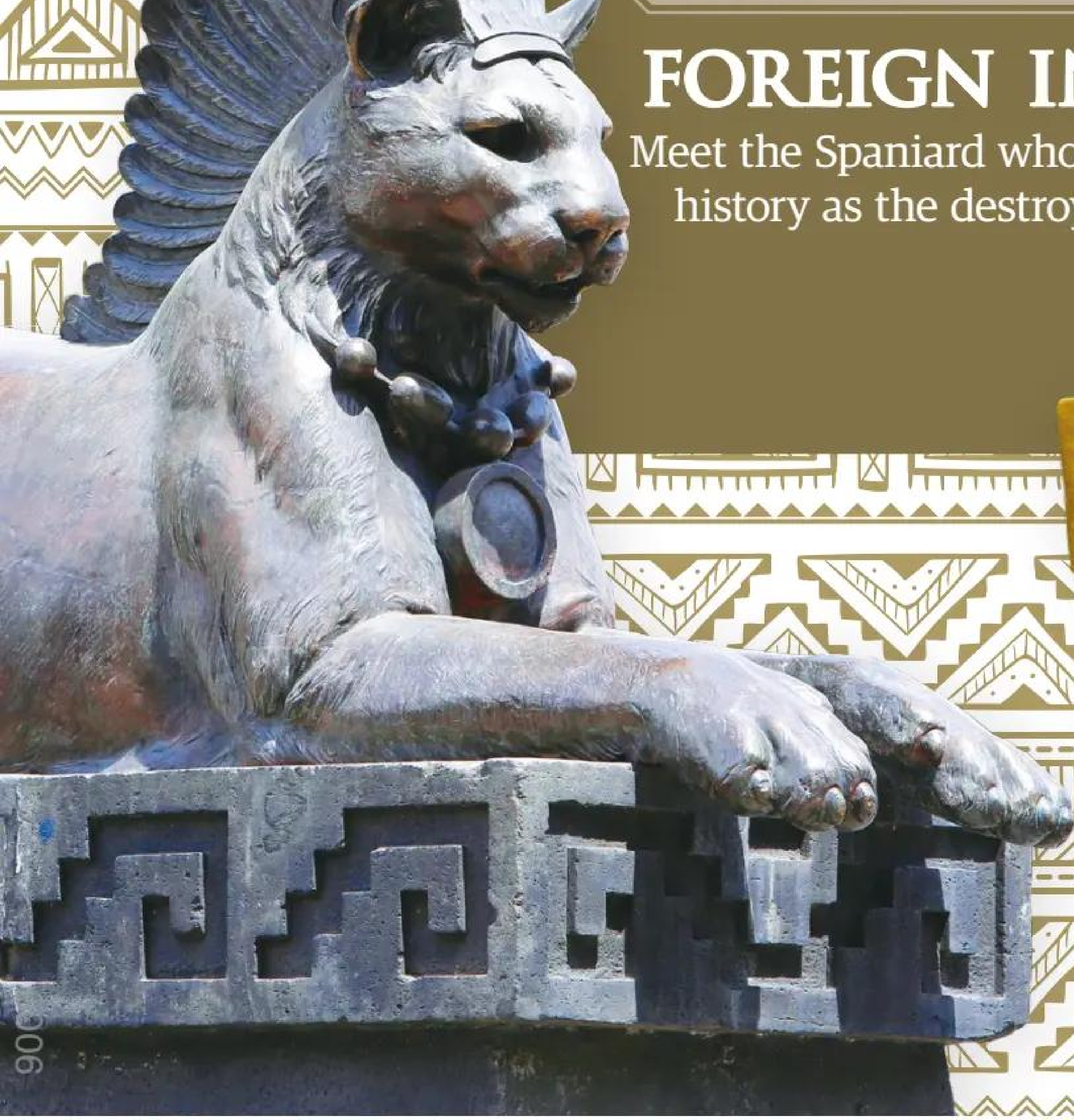

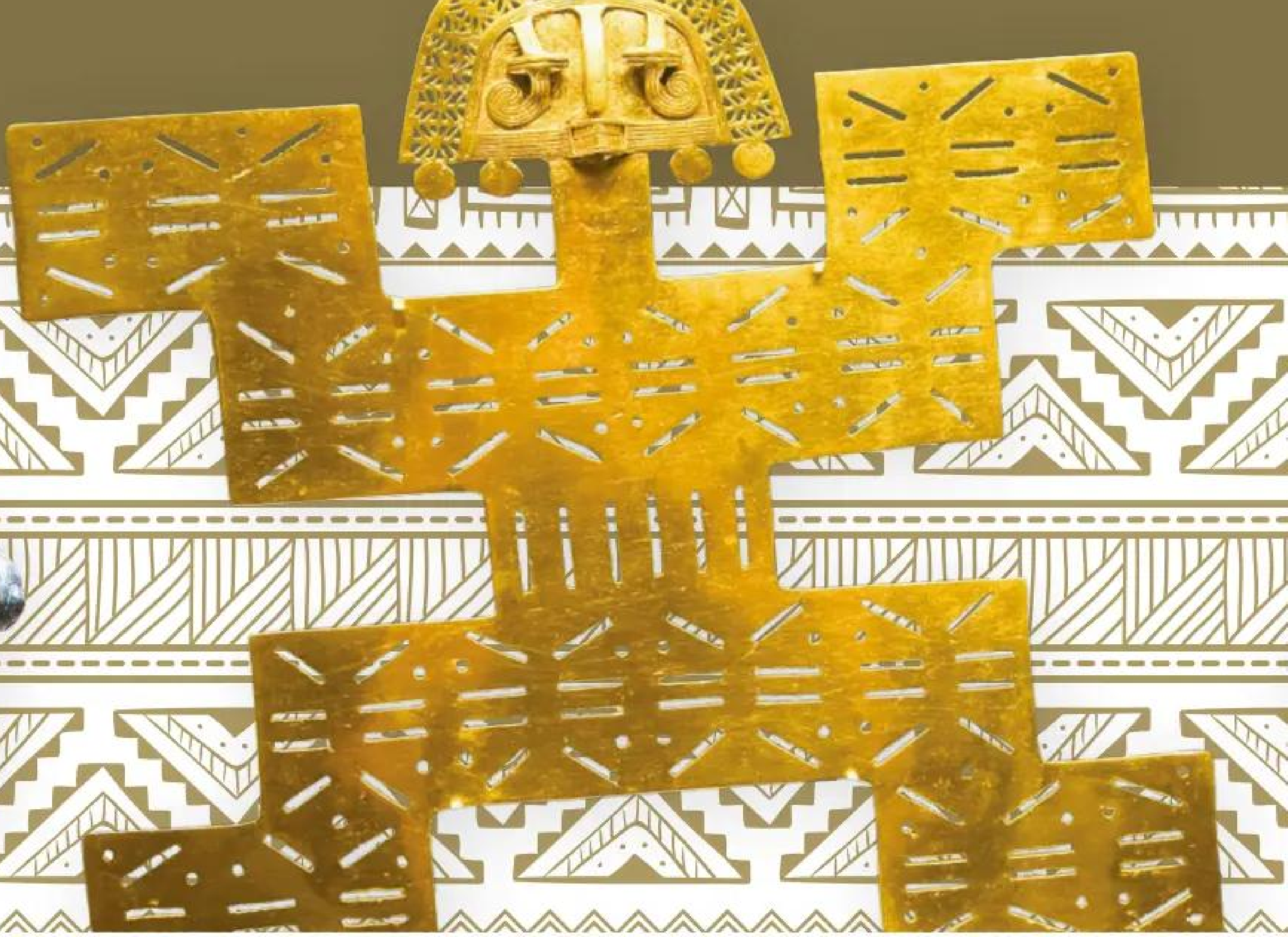

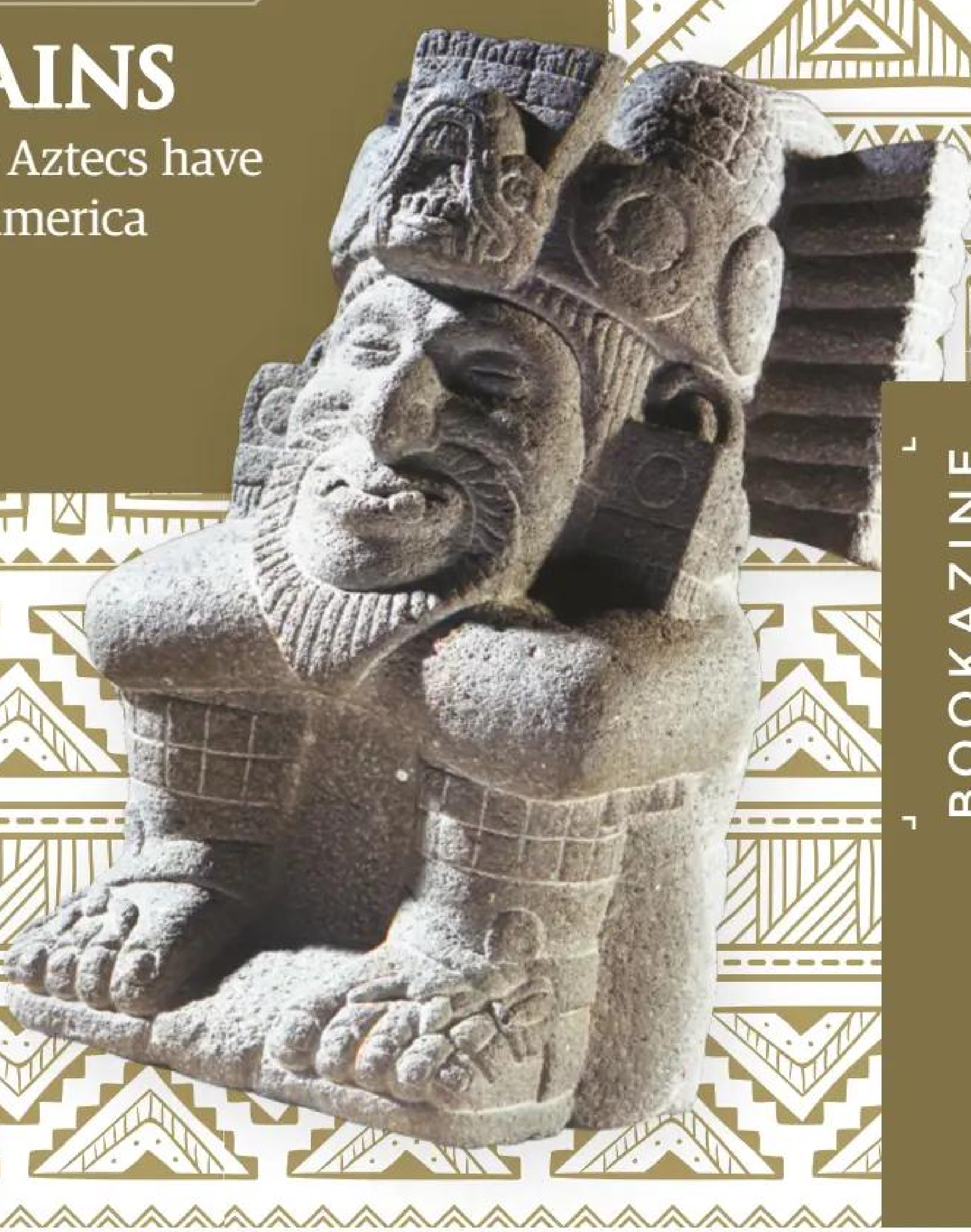

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